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MR. MERIVALE

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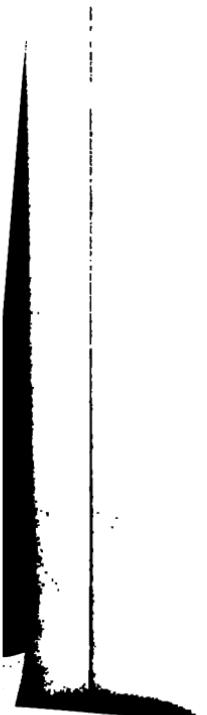
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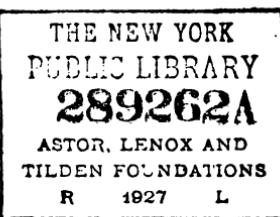
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THE
MARRIAGE OF MR. MERIVALE

CHAPTER I

A BROKEN CHORD

“**T**HREE! Ted is out! I knew he would do something like that soon — but — what a stroke!”

Muriel Bowness flung down her scoring-book, and whilst her cry of disgust was being echoed, in various degrees of sincerity, by the crowd of ladies and cricketers who were gathered round the tea-table under the old trees of the Park, she, heart and soul in the game, with an earnest gesture of despair, looked up appealingly at Arthur Merivale. He had risen from the seat at her side, had laid aside his blazer, and was quietly buttoning on his batting gloves.

A Broken Chord

"Mr. Merivale," she said, "you simply must make fifty, or we shall lose the match."

The look of appeal in those soft dark eyes and in those sweet lips half asunder would have sent any man worthy of the name rejoicing to the scaffold. Merivale, who with the natural egotism of youth, fancied he could detect a certain personal ring in her voice, smiled gladly at the speaker and advanced to the wicket, determined to do or die. Secretly, indeed, he had a quiet confidence in his powers of doing. He had bowled for Oxford that year, and, like most bowlers, held himself in no small esteem as a batsman. Good bat or bad, however, now, without doubt, was the moment for him to try his best to get runs. This was the last match of the annual cricket week at Prancehurst Manor, and it was the one of all others which the Prancehurst team were determined to win. For they were playing Southdown, the neighboring country town, and never yet (this was some fifteen years ago, and the record, I fear, stands no longer) —never yet in the history of the Prancehurst week had Southdown proved victorious. But this year, to the dismay of the home team, Southdown had brought over Beaming, the famous Surrey fast bowler, and terrible was the havoc he had played with the ribs and the hands and the wickets of the Prancehurst batsmen. They, one by one, as they

retired disconsolate to the tent or returned grimacing to rejoin the ladies who sat beneath the trees on the far side of the ground, declared that to play Beaming on that bumpy Park wicket was not exactly good enough. Some of them seemed thereby to hint that if they had cared to take the risk they could have stayed at the wicket, others, confessing that they were beaten, grumbled none the less at this importation of a foreign professional into the opposing side. But, say what they would, grumble and hint they never so shrewdly, the fact remained that seven of their wickets had fallen for thirty-two runs when Muriel made her despairing appeal to Arthur Merivale. Never had a man a finer opportunity of saving his side, covering himself with glory, and earning the sweet reward of praise from the squire's lovely daughter.

Merivale was vaguely conscious of these facts as he walked to the wicket. The general impression of a crisis at hand braced his nerves and strengthened his determination. He took guard and, with perfect coolness, but with that curious intense alertness of eye and muscle which a man feels to whom a crisis is as a tonic or a sea bath, prepared to receive his first ball from Beaming. Come what might, fast yorker or faster break-back, shooter or bumping ball, he felt with a thrill of satisfaction

that to-day he would be quick enough—everything to-day seemed so intensely clear to his eye. She, back there among the trees was watching him, and he was here to stay; to stop the rot, and to save his side. Why not? Even Beaming, he began to argue with himself, quelling arising doubt, as he became aware that that famous bowler was rushing towards him like a buffalo, even Beaming was human and under another name, might, just like another, easily—no, possibly—be hit out of the ground. He saw the ball clearly as it left the great man's hand, knew, as he saw it, that it would pitch a good length ball, and in obedience to his cricketer's instinct, but not reason, out to meet it went Merivale's left leg and his bat straight together. The stroke, on other grounds, would have been correct enough; but—alas for the plans of men and mice—as the ball touched the ground it reared straight up and coming at a tremendous pace it almost missed the bat, but not quite—for it just touched the shoulder of the corner of it, flew off that, and after describing a beautiful curve fell, a Dolly Varden catch, into the hands of long-slip. Moment of horrible humiliation!

“Lord! what an ass I was not to hit! What on earth was the use of trying to *play*? ” Merivale muttered savagely to himself as he walked back defeated, abashed, chin on breast.

"Bad luck!" cried Ted Bowness to comfort him, as he threw his bat beneath a tree.

"Bad stroke," replied he, with a shake of the head.

As he slowly dragged on his coat he caught sight of the scoring-book in which Muriel, who had not looked up once whilst he was returning, was busy writing with an almost vicious vehemence.

"Caught Dolly, bowled Beaming—o," he read and watched her finish the "o" with a careful, unkind precision.

She looked up, and, catching his disconsolate stare:

"It's no use playing forward," she commented; "the game is to hit."

"Of course," he answered humbly; "you are quite right. But my miserable theory was to play a ball or two to get my eye in first and then begin . . . Thirty-two—eight—naught! Brilliant, is n't it?"

Silence reigned among the party. Muriel took refuge in her scoring-book, too disgusted to complain or even criticise. Merivale, crestfallen, thought sadly of the reception he might have had if only he had managed to scrape together those fifty runs. There is in life no more melancholy subject for reflection than that of the runs we might have got—the scores that might have been.

The remaining wickets fell for an additional six runs. The situation was too tragic for words.

In the silence of the tea-time, the unhappy batsmen crept about like whipped schoolboys, timidly offering the ladies cake.

Muriel had closed her scoring-book and sat resting her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand, gazing in despair at the distant stumps, which stood deserted in the open, shimmering in the blazing August sun. It was a lovely scene. The white canvas of the tents showed up the deep greens of the surrounding coppices and of the stately Park. In the distance, across the trees and paddock, wherein the fat kine of the home-farm lay lazily chewing the cud, the gray stonework and the red-brick chimneys of the ancient Manor were just charmingly visible.

But Muriel for once cared nothing for these things—nor even for tea.

"No, thanks," she said to the sedulous Merivale, when he offered her first sandwiches, then cake, "no thanks, I can't possibly eat anything. Oh! is n't it quite *too* miserable? And to lose this match of all others after we have done so well in the rest. It really *is* . . . "

She flung out her hands in the abandonment of disgust. Merivale flushed. Then, "We have n't lost it yet," he said boldly.

" You don't mean to say you think we shall get them out for less than thirty-eight ? " she asked rather scornfully. " Why, there 's Pritchard and Jones and Caving, besides three or four others on their side, who can *bat*."

Merivale was rather nettled by the implied taunt, as perhaps he was intended to be. " Well," he answered a little hotly, " they are no better than we are and . . . "

She smiled when she saw that his pride was aroused, and said softly:

" Oh, if only you were to bowl them all out ! "

There was a slight emphasis on the " you," and, as she spoke, again those parted lips and those dark eyes in their setting of peach-bloom cheeks made a mute appeal.

" We 'll try," he answered sturdily, as he took off his coat.

Whilst the Prancehurst team were busy taking their places in the field, Muriel found heart to discuss with her friends the faintness of the possibility of Merivale bowling out the other side for less than forty runs. Certainly he had bowled well, but not wonderfully well, during the week; nor could it be said that he had so far quite lived up to Ted Bowness's descriptions of the amazing feats he had accomplished that season for the 'Varsity and for their college team. Ted was Muriel's only brother,

and, like Merivale, had just taken his final schools at Oxford, and, like him, was devoted to cricket without regarding it as the only rational interest in life. Muriel shared her brother's enthusiasm, and in days when few ladies, comparatively, knew anything about the game and fewer still cared for it, she knew everything of the theory of cricket and occasionally, with Ted, played it not contemptibly. Her father, who was the member of Parliament and the leading squire of that part of the county—the “Squember,” she called him on the analogy of a Squarson—did not altogether approve of her playing, but she persevered in her enthusiasm and ended in this, as indeed in most matters, in getting her own way. For she was not the kind of girl who invites refusal, but rather one of those whom the world, if it could but have its way, would delight to please and honor, one whose life seemed, to a rash prophet, destined to be uneventfully happy. Her ways, one supposed, would be made smooth and her paths straight. She was original without posing, and beautiful without appearing to be aware of it. There was, indeed, something strange in her loveliness and this note of strangeness rendered it doubly fascinating. The blackness of her beautiful wavy tresses, each individual hair of which was adorably crisp, curly, and electric, together with the blackness of her eyes and the deep

coloring of her cheeks were supported in their suggestion of something exotic in her quality by her habit of lively gesticulation and a quaint, quick manner of speech. Witty and well read she was also, and there was little cause for wonder if her brother's friend, who had just come down from Oxford with his "Blue" and a brilliant degree, had fallen deeply in love with her. As he was the only son of a Cumberland squire, and as his tutors at Oxford prophesied for him a great career at the bar, there was nothing in the situation to alarm the "Squember" or his wife. Muriel herself, as so often and so strangely happens before the word is spoken or the sudden situation reveals the blushing maiden to herself, was innocent of her own feelings towards the splendid young athlete who clearly found so much pleasure in her society. If it had occurred to her to analyze her feelings at all, she would probably have decided that apart from regarding him as a hero on the cricket field she found him extremely attractive to talk to or to be with. Otherwise, she would have asked, what should she know or think of him? Girls can only judge of men from the hints and references of other men.

But the game has begun. Muriel, whilst we have been writing of her, has recorded in her score-book the fact that Ted has sent down a maiden over of

his slow, left-hand deliveries. Now young Arthur Merivale, breathing out fury and destruction in memory of his duck's egg and Muriel's scorn of his batting, is about to bowl his first ball. It is a fast yorker, and, amid a cry of delight from the party beneath the trees, crash go the stumps, while the batsman still holds his bat poised in air, pointing at Merivale.

"Eh! but yon 's a fast bowler!" was his dismal comment as he retired slowly tent-wards.

And now ensued a scene of excitement such as had never before been witnessed in the old Park. Four more batsmen were dismissed in Merivale's next four overs, and still no runs had been made. Then the latest arrival at the wickets scored two off Ted Bowness, who promptly took his revenge by bowling him next ball.

The applause beneath the trees grew almost hysterical. Six wickets for two runs! With a margin of thirty-six and only four wickets to fall, the Prancehurst party began to feel almost safe. The last batsmen in village teams are never, they knew, very highly finished performers.

Muriel was so excited that she could hardly keep the bowling analysis — and what a bowling analysis it was! Merivale, acutely conscious of the delight which he was causing her, grew elated with his success. He looked at the incoming batsman con-

temptuously, for he wore only one old pad, and he carried a "presentation" bat, on the blade of which there glistened in the sunlight a large silver shield, appropriately inscribed.

"Give me the ball," he exclaimed in his overweening pride; "this man is a corpse. I don't think it will take long to settle Cadaver."

"Why Cadaver?" asked the wicket-keeper.

"Cadaver," replied Ted from short-slip, "is the Latin for a corpse. Go down bottom."

Merivale's confidence really seemed justified, for he was still quite fresh and bowling at the top of his speed and he had never bowled a better length in his life. The wicket, too, was helping him greatly, making the ball bump now and then in an incalculable manner. The Corpse increased Arthur's confidence by refusing to take guard, remarking that it did not signify, and by holding his bat handle so close to the ground that his knuckles touched the grass. His whole attitude was, doubtless, most unorthodox. But his play was still more surprising. For, as soon as the ball left Arthur's hand, the batsman, to the amazement of the spectators, sprang out of his ground and hitting with a swift mowing stroke, swept what would have been a straight and deadly yorker right round to long-on. The ball landed on the cricket tent. The next ball he treated in precisely the same way; and

the next, which was pitched short outside the off stump, running out again and waving his bat like a racquet, he struck in its flight as it rose from the ground and drove past cover-point.

Twelve runs in three balls!

" This man," observed Muriel Bowness, " may be a cricketer, but he *does* play cricket with an accent."

A dead silence, an ominous silence, a silence of dread reigned as Merivale delivered the last ball of his over. He dropped it very short, but even so the Corpse ran almost to the pitch of it and hit at it blindly. The ball reared straight up, just touched the edge of the swiping bat and soared over the wicket-keeper's head for three. The Corpse now faced Ted's bowling and hit two fours and a nine off that over, although in making his last stroke he gave a chance in the deep field to an unfortunate cousin of Muriel's, who was standing near enough to the onlookers to hear their comments on his achievement.

" *Ubi est illud Cadaver? Non est inventum!* " (" Where is that Corpse ? He has not been found ") quoted Monckton, who was fielding cover-point, to mid-on as they crossed over. Monckton was a bright schoolboy who had just gone up to the 'Varsity, where his clever tongue had made him precociously popular. He was no cricketer, but was

played, so he was chaffingly assured, for his social qualities. He usually spoke of himself as the Social Blot in order to disarm criticism, whether of his manners or his cricket. On this occasion his reference was certainly not amiss. For, like the reporter in De Quincey's *Murder as a Fine Art*, the Corpse of whom Merivale had spoken was indeed not to be found. But the batsman who had been dubbed with this unflattering sobriquet could not understand why the field tittered and began to chant in appreciation those strange Latin words. He clenched his teeth, however, and assured himself that he was not to be made game of. He looked knowingly at the score-board and drew comfort from that.

Thirty runs up, six wickets down, last man o, was he saw, the state of affairs signalled there. The partisans of Southdown grew loud in their confident applause of him.

Merivale gave him another good length ball, but, for some reason never explained, the Corpse stayed in his ground this time and endeavored to play it. It was a beautiful ball, beyond the power of almost any batsman to play. Pitching on the blind spot, it broke back with lightning rapidity; but it was too good: it beat bat, stumps, and wicket-keeper and went for four byes.

It was then that Merivale had the inspiration of

the really intelligent bowler. Rushing up to the wicket as though he were going to bowl his fastest, he dragged the ball with his fingers just as he was delivering it and sent down a very slow, very short ball. Discomforted by his ill-success in attempting to play the previous one, down the wicket came the Corpse, as Merivale had calculated, rushing out to meet the slow ball and never realizing that it was slow. Swish! went his horizontal bat—but he was “a quarter of an hour too soon, cricket time,” as Muriel observed, and though, after he had missed the ball, he made a desperate, heroic effort to regain his ground, three yards outside the crease was too flagrant an excursion. In spite of his pathetic appeal, the aged, sympathizing umpire gave him out, and he retired, amid a hurricane of cheers, having made twenty-eight out of thirty-four runs scored.

The Prancehurst team, after giving him a round of hearty applause, clustered around Merivale and sang softly to him those mysterious words, “*Ubi est illud Cadaver? Non est inventum.*”

Merivale laughed and bowled the next two batsmen first ball, thus accomplishing the hat-trick. In came the last man and made an upper cut, over slip’s head, for two, off the last ball of the over. Amid breathless excitement Ted bowled a maiden over to the other batsman: the ball shaved the leg stump, just went over the wicket, almost, it seemed,

went through it, but refused obstinately to remove the bails. Once more Merivale took the ball, and his first delivery also just skimmed the bails, hit the wicket-keeper on the end of the fingers, and went for one bye.

"One run to equal, two to beat!" was the cry from the scorer's tent.

Who was it, fiend or angel, that prompted Merivale now to try again that cunning slow ball? It had been so successful before: it had slain the redoubtable Corpse; surely it would settle this customer! For it should be, it *must* be, the best slow ball ever bowled. So he reasoned; so he determined; and full of heroic resolution he ran once more up to the wicket. But in his endeavor to take the pace off the ball with his fingers as it left his hand, this time he spoilt its direction.

To her horror Muriel saw a very slow, rather low full pitch to leg gently approaching the expectant striker. Unable to watch the disastrous flight any longer she covered her face with her hands. Some even say she wept. Yet, had she watched, strange indeed was the course of events opened to her gaze.

"I sees it comin' and I 'its it," was the batsman's account of the matter, both then and thereafter, when for weeks, months, nay years to come, he was appealed to on the subject. And hit it incontestably he did: he hit it very hard and low to square

leg. The umpire also saw the ball coming and he ducked to let it pass over his head. A younger man would have jumped out of the way, but he was old and stiff with rheumatism. He ducked, and, as he did so, his straw hat fell off his bald pate and prevented his observing that he had not ducked low enough. Full on the crown of his head the speeding ball struck him. The fieldsmen, careless of the ball, horror-stricken at the catastrophe, ran to his aid, and the batsmen, who amid the wild cheering of the Southdown supporters, had started to run the winning runs, stopped still in the middle of the pitch gazing at him in their concern.

The old umpire maintained his crouching position for a moment or two, and then slowly raising his head he looked up dazed but unhurt. He lifted his hand and began to rub his pate gingerly. As he did so his eye caught sight of the ball. It had rolled back with the force of the concussion with his amazing skull, back all the way to the wicket, and striking the stumps had dislodged the bails. The batsmen stood mute and wondering still in the middle of the pitch.

"Out!" exclaimed the old man suddenly, and turning his back on the game, he hobbled off towards the tent. And again Monckton from cover-point chanted his Latin song: "*Ubi est illud Cadaver? Non est inventum.*" But though the umpire was

not a corpse, the Southdown batsmen were by no means satisfied. There arose a babblement of voices; tongues wagged, lips pouted. Protests and laughter, temper and arguments were rife through the field; they sounded in the tent, echoed beneath the trees, and were borne aloft to the brazen, indifferent skies. Brazen and indifferent also was the umpire, who adhered stubbornly to his decision that the batsman was out, the cricket over for the day.

"I've had enough of it," he explained.

"But why does you give me out when nobody's agoin' to appeal, that's what I want to know?" demanded his victim "Mr. Bowness 'e sez as 'ow 'e'd never 'ave run me out loike that."

The old umpire was roused from his dogged taciturnity.

"Oo's a-talkin' of runnin' out?" he demanded indignantly. "Young man, I played cricket afore you was born and I never sez as 'ow it was runned out. You don't know the rules o' cricket and what's more you don't know 'ow to play cricket. You wants one run to save the match for our side (though I be umpire as sez so) and you gets a full pitch to leg. What does you do? Astead o' 'itting the ball out o' the ground, you 'its me on the 'ead with the blamed thing. Then you ups and sez you were n't runned out. No more you

war n't, no more it 's likely you ever will be. You ain't got the gumption to be run out. You 's not likely to get so far——”

“ Then 'ow was oi out, I 'd like to know ? ” asked the exasperated batsman.

“ You 's appealed to me, 'ow was you out,” returned the old man with dignity, “ and as an umpire I replies to you. You played on, that 's what you did, you played on ! ”

Soon Merivale left the excited teams to their discussions and strolling over to the trees picked up his coat and slipped it on. Then he advanced towards Muriel. Smiling with delight she clapped her hands as he advanced.

“ Splendid ! ” she cried. “ How splendid ! Eight wickets for nineteen runs. Look at your analysis.”

“ It is beautifully kept,” he said, as he bent over the book.

“ Oh no, it is n't really. I was far too excited to keep it neatly. I can't think how you kept your head so well.”

“ It was n't my fault at all, it was what you said to me before we went out into the field that made me bowl like that.”

“ What *I* said ? ”

“ Yes ”—he paused embarrassed, and then, to escape from saying what he meant, went on hurriedly, “ and as to keeping my head, look at

that last slow ball—that was a ‘head ball,’ if you like!”

“I hope that what I said was n’t responsible for that,” she smiled mischievously. “But was the man really out?”

“I always believe the umpire,” returned Merivale solemnly, and then told the story of his decision. “But the match is over,” he went on. “Won’t you stroll down to the orchard with me? There might be some ripe peaches, don’t you think?”

So they wandered towards the orchard, this boy and girl in the pride and beauty and carelessness of their youth, his lithe yet muscular frame forming the perfect counterpart of the slim graceful creature at his side.

The mellowing light of the afternoon sun cast a sheen of gold over the green leaves and burnished brown trunks of the coppice on their left; and the old red bricks of the orchard wall, touched by those soft yet brilliant rays, glowed a deeper, warmer red. Two squirrels playing on the grass outside the enclosure of the wood ran for a yard or two towards cover, then looking round and seeing boy and girl together stopped and renewed their frolics, knowing they had nothing to fear. But a blackbird, as Arthur opened the groaning iron gate of the fruit garden, flew squawking down a side path,

guilty of gooseberries. Gross gormandizer of forbidden fruit! His big yellow beak, his harsh discordant cry, and his heavy flight so close to the ground showed how far and how sudden had been his fall from the loveliness of his untainted spring song and his innocent youth.

"How splendid those old trees look in this light," said Arthur, pointing to a group of aged oaks in the Park, "I love old trees, but I somehow can never understand a man planting them in a Park like this—trees, I mean, which will not reach their prime till two generations of men have come and gone. What good does that do *him*? Why should we do these things for those who come after us?"

"Yes," laughed Muriel, "Why should we? What has posterity done for us?"

"But I suppose we must n't be too hard on them. They will have to read our poetry as it is. At least our poets say so."

"Poor things! Then we will certainly plant trees for them. That is the least we can do. Besides, you know, if there's anything in the transmigration of souls, one might be a squirrel oneself some day."

Arthur laughed and then, as they had exhausted for the moment their stock of nonsense, a silence, a self-conscious embarrassing silence ensued.

For the first time he had known her Arthur Merivale felt awkward and constrained in the presence of his merry, natural companion. That morning, for the first time, the depth and passion of his love had been revealed to him. For he had awaked, when the early sun was streaming in through his window, with an intensely vivid sensation of delight. In his sleep she had come to him —it had seemed to him a reality more real than life —and tenderly stooping over him had kissed him with gentle passion on the lips. That touch, the imaginary touch of that strange visitation had roused our dreaming Endymion to the knowledge and certainty of his love. When he woke and found it was indeed a dream, he lay quite still for an hour or more thrilling with the joy of it, every nerve vibrating with the excitement of that glorious illusion. A happiness so intensely felt that it was scarcely bearable, filled his whole being. He was animated with a desire, never before realized, to see her, to be with her, again,—at once,—and to touch, to kiss in reality the sweet maiden who in his dreaming fantasy had so vividly brushed his lips with hers. Then he had jumped up hurriedly and dressed and gone forth to be with her, to walk with her over the wet and sparkling meadows, in the dewy mists of the dawn. For he half believed that there actually he would find her, waiting to hear

him tell his tale of passionate love. He half believed that she, whom his own imagination had suddenly revealed to him as all and more than all of his life, his being, must in some sort share in, even, he dared to hope, rejoice in that revelation. Of course, he had not found her. But in his dreamy ramble through the silence of that August morning he had learnt many things, above all he had learnt to feel already an intense gratitude to her who had inspired him with love. And such gratitude is one of the highest attributes of the lover. This glow of gratitude had saved him that morning from the usual fate of occasional early risers, who are, I have noticed, apt to be unbearably superior at breakfast and abominably cross all the rest of the day. When he returned, then, to the Manor to bathe and dress for breakfast, his eye shone with the brightness of the happy dreamer. He knew that he was blessed among mortals, for he had been walking with the God of Love.

Now at last, Muriel was with him and alone, and, as they entered the orchard, in the light of the revelation that had come to him and of the recollection of that imagined kiss, he felt shy and embarrassed. His pulse quickened, the blood throbbed through his veins and he dared not begin to speak because his throat was strangely husky, and his voice threatened to escape control.

" What are you going to do now you have gone down from Oxford ? " Muriel asked him presently, by way of breaking the long silence.

" Well," answered he, grateful for the opportunity of speaking of some practical matter, " my father wants me to live at home and help him to manage our little place in Cumberland. But I hope he won't insist on that. I hate the idea above everything."

" But it would be nice to be at home with your father and mother."

" Yes, I know, awfully nice. And it would be hateful to live away from them. If they really insist on it, I shall make the best of the job with that reflection. But you see"—he turned towards her and his frank, open smile lit up his boyish face—" you see, I am ambitious. I want to go to the bar—to make my way—to succeed—to be known. I want an active career in the middle of things. I want to live in London and in the end, if possible to go into Parliament. If ever I get there I want to be on the side of practical common sense and simple justice. Oh, I want—" he broke off, and laughed lightly at his own enthusiasm. " There 's my programme for you."

He was dimly aware as he spoke that it was the contact of his mind with hers that had suddenly caused these ambitions to flare up in him. Never

before, in his easy career of academic success, had he formulated his future so clearly. But from her inspiring companionship his enthusiasm seemed to catch fire. His purpose became definite and his endeavors were turned vehemently into a certain channel, whilst he was speaking. He turned to look at her and saw that her eyes were sparkling with an enthusiasm borrowed from his or like to his.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I know what you mean! I know so well what you feel! It's not so much to be someone as to *do* something that one wants."

Merivale was surprised in his boyish egoism to find that another—and a girl—was filled with the same ambitions as himself. Boys—clever boys especially—usually suppose themselves very singular. As they grow older they discover that they are not so peculiar as they had supposed. Muriel, Arthur Merivale vaguely perceived, was beginning to feel within her that desire for an ampler life, a freer mode of being which is so characteristic of the young girls of our day. They have so much more liberty than their parents had that they fret the more under the restraints they still have to endure. If love or circumstances do not involve them in the greater and more absorbing bondage of matrimony, this longing increases until it fetters them in the

relentless tyranny of divine discontent. For, for a woman as for a man, every struggle after freedom ends only in an exchange of slavery, though the change may be for the better. And in these days when there are a thousand beneficial ways in which a woman may employ her energies it certainly is for the better.

Arthur Merivale, surprised and delighted at Muriel's sympathetic understanding, was honest with her.

"I think, in my case, it is to *be* somebody that I want."

And the difference in their ideas of the scope of ambition represented the difference between the selfishness of the man and the unselfishness of the woman.

"There are only three things I really care about," he added, with the air of one who is half in jest.

"They are?"

"Cricket—and a career—and—and *you!*" He spoke laughingly, but there was a peculiar vibration in the low tones of his naturally rich, bass voice, which thrilled as they startled his hearer. They sounded the signal of alarm for her and yet how was it that the alarm should be given in such beautiful, unforgettable tones?

Muriel, as he spoke, was standing on tiptoe,

trying to pick a plum from one of the branches of a tree, that were nailed against the wall like outstretched arms. Her head was half turned from Merivale. She did not seem to hear him and he could not see the faint flush which deepened the color in her cheeks.

"Let me pick that for you," he said, and his voice sounded thick and strange in his ears. As he spoke he stretched his arm above hers, and watched with a kind of stupid amazement, his own strong, sunburnt hand tremble as he tried to take hold of the little white hand which was closing round the white fruit.

Muriel snatched her hand away.

"Thanks," she said quizzingly, "but I'm not a '*thing*.' What do you mean by calling me a thing?"

"Oh, you know I didn't mean that," he protested, with an earnestness almost ridiculously serious.

She picked another plum and continued chaffing him.

"It's really nice to know for certain that you approve of me. Still you are dreadfully, painfully honest. Just think where I come in the scale of your affections! First the bat, then the bar, and then—poor me!"

She laughed brightly at his discomfiture.

" But the scale was crescendo," he pleaded,
" you ' was a rhetorical climax."

" A rhetorical climax ? How horrible ! I never thought of myself in that light before. There—the very idea of it has made me swallow a pip. I shall wake up every morning for the next month in the dread of finding a fruit-tree growing out of my mouth ! I know I shall. My old nurse always used to say that would happen if I swallowed a cherry stone. That ' s what comes of being called a rhetorical climax ! "

He laughed at last gaily, naturally.

" Ah ! " she cried in tones of relief, " now that you have grown less serious, you may have this apple."

" Eve tempted me and I fell," he quoted as he took it. " Really we might be in the Garden of Eden ! "

" It would be rather awkward if we were, would n't it ? " she asked wickedly.

He laughed again.

" I mean this orchard must be almost as beautiful," he replied, waving his hand towards the tree stems that shone, gilded by the slanting rays of the sun.

" Yes, it must," she answered, in absent, dreamy tones, as if her thoughts were far away in some ideal spot of fantasy. Then with one of her

characteristically quick changes of subject and manner, she broke out vivaciously again:

"But I want to learn about this career of yours. Will you let me read your hand? I will tell your fortune. An orchard is the ideal place for palmistry."

"For a flirtation," Arthur muttered savagely, for he was growing angry at her frivolity. He wanted her to be serious,—sentimental, if you like. For he himself was in such deadly earnest about this great love he bore her: he wished to tell her of all it meant to him, of all he hoped it might mean to her, and he was irritated by the chaff and laughter and nonsense with which she checked him. He did not understand that his words had thrown her into a palpitation of dread and yet of desire to be told that he loved her. He did not understand that, in the shyness and confusion caused by the sudden suspicion, which had been forced upon her by this first moment of self-questioning—suspicion, conviction, almost—that the man at her side was somehow for her different from all other men in the world, dearer perhaps, she was chattering wildly and at random with the simple intention of recoveringing her presence of mind.

He held out his hand.

"But I don't believe in palmistry," he said presently, as she carefully studied the lines in his hand.

"What do you think about it?" she asked absently, intent upon her scrutiny.

"Oh, well, I suppose there is as much in the lines of the hand as there is in the facial lines and features and expressions of countenance of which we form, by an unconscious generalization from our own experience, a general idea of a man's character and profession,—but there can't be much more in it than that, and when these professors of palmistry pretend to be able to tell you all that has happened and is going to happen to you, and in fact, what a great success you will be and what a wonderful person you are, or would be if you only realized and developed your qualities—they always do that, you know—why, then, they are, cleverly enough, simply trading in human vanity."

"What a pity you are n't a character in one of Dizzy's novels," she commented. "You might have made quite a good epigram out of that rather long and shapeless sentence."

"Is it your pleasure that I should commit an epigram?"

"Yes, do try! I am not as frightened of epigrams as some people are; they really so seldom bite."

"Well then, here goes! Belief in palmistry is the price the commonplace are always ready to pay for the assurance of their own singularity."

Muriel looked up with a very serious expression on her face.

" That's rather heavy, is n't it ? " she asked, and after a pause added :

" Yours is a very remarkable—a very *singular* hand."

" Good ! " he laughed.

But she continued in the same earnest tone,—and how far she was in earnest and how far in jest Merivale could not positively determine.

" You are capable of great self-sacrifice and so you will prove yourself, although you appear to be rather selfish."

" That sounds like hedging—or a paradox," he commented. " But it is quite possible, for the selfish can, I believe, be most nobly and truly generous—but not in small matters—just as some brave men are nervously afraid of cats and drains."

" You will meet with a great disappointment in life."

" Does that mean I sha' n't marry ? "

" I can't quite make out about that. Why ? Do you want to marry ? "

" Yes."

" How funny ! I can never understand anyone wanting to marry—in the abstract."

" Well, if you were I and I were you, perhaps you would."

"What, in the abstract?" she laughed out at him.

He returned abruptly to palmistry.

"But it's no use prophesying for me, because I don't believe the palmists' prophecies. Tell me of my character, won't you?"

"Well, your character then, though I think you are rather ungracious—and ungrateful for my efforts. Ah! H'm! You have a very mercurial temperament. At one moment you are very lively, at the next very depressed. You are an up and down person rather."

"True."

"You are clever. But in your life you waste your cleverness. And there is a good deal of wit in your hands."

"I would rather have it in my head," he laughed, "but what about my heart?"

"There seem to be two deep love affairs in your life, one great passion followed by one not quite so genuine. But, there, I'm prophesying. It seems as if your home life would run counter to the great passion of your heart. Your parents will perhaps forbid the match."

"Not much chance of *that* being true," Arthur murmured, whilst she absorbingly ran on.

"But its influence is immense, overwhelming. You must really be tremendously in love. It

appears to be very important that you should settle the matter soon—declare yourself, I mean. It will make all the difference to your life. It looks as if something will interfere and your whole career may be spoilt, altered, unless you settle it soon, one way or the other——”

She paused abruptly and dropped his hand. She had been so carried away by the interest of her scrutiny that she had not in the least realized—such was her natural, impetuous temperament—what significance her words must have for him. Now as she caught his look of burning love, it came to her with a shock of shamed surprise that she had, it must appear, to all intents and purposes, been asking him to propose—and to her.

A deep flush spread on her cheek and she turned away hastily. Arthur caught her hand and held her fast.

“No, you sha’ n’t go,” he said, in low vehement tones that vibrated with his passionate determination. “No, you sha’ n’t go, till you ’ve heard me, till I ’ve taken your advice.”

She was stung to the quick by that unhappy remark.

“Mr. Merivale!” she said with cold dignity, throwing back her head. But he still held her. Then she stamped her foot and passionately cried: “Let me go! Let me go, I say!”

But he held her still almost fiercely.

"I am sorry," he said, and again those rich tones of his kept her spellbound, "but you must hear me now. I cannot help it. Your words conveyed a meaning to me that you could not possibly see. You must let me finish now. I *have* met with that great passion of my life. I *am* tremendously in love. But you were quite wrong about my parents. They will be the last people in the world to object. Muriel——"

Clang! clang!

The iron gate of the orchard swung heavily to, and a footman was observed walking towards them, bearing a silver salver on which lay a telegram.

Arthur Merivale instantly dropped Muriel's hand and stood picking terribly unripe plums.

"It *was* the Garden of Eden," he murmured.
"Is this the serpent?"

"A telegram for Mr. Merivale," the footman explained, holding the salver out to him.

"A telegram for me? What on earth about, I wonder?" Arthur exclaimed, and then broke out into a laugh.

"Oh, I know! Miss Bowness, I call you to witness that I was not taken in. I bet it is a "rag" telegram from Ted or somebody about that bowling performance."

The *bonhomie* and *bardinage* which prevail in a

cricket week had rendered him, as he observed, a bit shy of practical jokes. He was nervously anxious not to have his leg pulled.

He opened the yellow envelope, smiling and expectant. But the smile died from his lips as he read, and his jaw dropped. Muriel saw a look of horror come into his eyes.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "how terrible!"

"I am afraid you have bad news, Mr. Merivale?" Muriel asked gently.

"Sorry to say your father has met with a fatal accident. Come at once. JAMES."

Merivale read out in a hard, strained voice. "James is our doctor. If he sent it then something must have happened to my mother, too——"

The telegram crumpled and twisted beneath the nervous stress of his fingers.

"Oh, no! That can't be," said Muriel, with gentle earnestness. "It only means that she asked the doctor to send the telegram. That's quite natural. And perhaps the accident to your father won't prove quite so bad as the doctor thinks at first. They often make mistakes——"

She stopped short in the eager flow of her womanly comforting. Her mouth twitched and her dark eyes filled with sympathetic tears as she marked the strained look which the agony of a sor-

row hitherto unknown had set upon his boyish features. And she turned away her head in silence.

" You are very kind, very, very kind," he said in a curiously dull tone, as if he were hardly conscious of his own words. While the tongue spoke all his thoughts and emotions were concentrated on his Cumberland home.

" But I must go at once."

He took out his watch and was silent for a moment, making a rapid calculation.

" If I catch the 6.30 train from here, I shall be in time for the Euston express and that will get me home early to-morrow. You will excuse me and understand, I know. I have barely time to change my things and to get to the station as it is. Good-bye, good-bye, and thank you for your sympathy."

He shook the hand proffered to him almost absent-mindedly and hurried off towards the house. At that moment the garden gate clanged again. Muriel's brother and cousin with Monckton and another of the cricket team, approached, strolling arm in arm down the orchard path. When they caught sight of Arthur, they burst into song.

" *Ubi est illud Cadaver? Non est inventum!* *Non est inventum!*" they sang, each taking a part and playing with the words in mock imitation of an Elizabethan madrigal. " *Ubi est illud Cadaver, Cadaver? Non est, non est inven-tum.*"



CHAPTER II

THE YELLOW LEAF

I have lived long enough ; my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf.

STUNG by the horrid import of those words so lightly caroled by the jesting quartette, Arthur Merivale fled down the garden path and never looked back at his gentle sympathizer. Overwhelmed by the shock of the news he had received, all thoughts, naturally, of himself, of his own projects, ambitions, and love had been dashed aside. Heart and soul he was engrossed by the memory of the father he had lost and by the yearning to be at the side of his mother in the hour of her bereavement. He never realized the sympathy that Muriel was giving him ; he never saw the look of love and pity swimming in her eyes.

Afterwards, when he reflected on that scene in the orchard, he assured himself, with bitter satisfaction, that he had been interrupted before he could

make any definite proposal and that what he had said had been addressed to a girl struggling to get away from him, striving not to listen to his words of love. He never had the least suspicion that the one great prize in life that he was destined to desire was actually in his grasp. So dense and modest are men when they love truly and are inexperienced in love. Verily, when the male is modest it stands him in bad stead.

At first indeed, when Arthur Merivale arrived at his home among the Cumberland mountains, he had much else to engage his thoughts; all his ideas and energies were absorbed by the tragic situation in which he found himself involved. His father, the genial and popular Johnny Merivale as everybody in the county called him, had been killed by a fall from his horse. Hale and hearty, with a jest on his lips, he had left home after luncheon and within an hour he was brought back dead. A loose stone on the road, a stumble on the part of his horse, and in a second he had passed from the careless pride of vigorous life to the dread mysteries of death. Hard on the heels of that first tragedy had followed a second. At the sight of her husband's corpse being brought into the house, Mrs. Merivale had been stricken with paralysis, and, though the doctor entertained no fears for her life, he did not conceal from Arthur that she would never be able

to leave the house, that she would be inevitably an invalid all her days.

The meaning of this for himself Arthur understood at once and accepted, so far as he himself was concerned, without protest. The bitterness of his own grief for his father and sympathy for his mother's lot purified him for the moment of all selfish considerations and of all self-pity. Cheerfully he resigned the ambitions he had nourished and all hopes of a public career. He determined, quickly and at once, without question, without complaint, to live always on his Cumberland property and to be the nurse and companion of his widowed mother.

Horrified at her prospect of a lonely and crippled life, in the first agony of her loss and of her physical prostration, she sent for him and begged him to stay by her during her few remaining years. To confirm him in this course, it did not require the urgent entreaties which, in her unnerved condition, she repeated with all the vehement and pathetic selfishness of an invalid not yet accustomed to the sickness and loneliness of an invalid's life. His decision had been taken, he gently assured her, the moment he realized the situation, and nothing should alter it. The tears and kisses she rained upon his head were more than sufficient reward for his sacrifice.

But yet another blow was in store for him. After the funeral he had to deal with those dreadful investigations and business arrangements which add so much to the pathos of these our human tragedies. It was, indeed, some time before Arthur Merivale could bring himself to consider them. This prying into the practical details of his father's affairs, this invasion into the secrets of his life, would, he feared, somehow detract from the reverence with which he regarded him; they would interfere with the sweet recollections, the holy thoughts, the simple faith that enshrined his father's memory in his soul. When at last he conquered these natural shrinkings and was able, with the help of the family solicitor, to make a thorough investigation of the property, his forebodings were in some sort justified. His father, it proved, had been careless and extravagant in money matters. He had raised mortgages in his light-hearted way and left the interest of them unpaid. It was the old story of the well-to-do man carelessly living year after year just a little beyond his ample income.

"The upshot is," said Mr. Markby, the solicitor, "the upshot is that we shall have to sell much of the property, I fear. Then, when the debts and mortgages are all settled or provided for——"

"What will remain?"

"Your mother's jointure is five hundred a year.

You will be able to pay that in full and perhaps there may be a few pounds over—that is, of course, if the property is very carefully and economically managed. You will have to do that—or sell the whole place."

"And I must live here, penniless, professionless, without hope, without ambition—God!" he cried in the bitterness of his heart, and as he put his head in his hands, the old solicitor saw the tears trickling down the cheeks of the overwrought boy.

"You must look after your mother," he said kindly, as he put his hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, I must look after my mother," Arthur echoed.

"And the property. That's profession enough, surely. And after all," said the old man, trying to comfort him from his strong business point of view, "after all things might have been worse. Perhaps it is all for the best. If things had gone on like this a few years more——"

"Yes, of course! I ought to be thankful my father died so soon, ought n't I!" exclaimed the unhappy youth bitterly, as Mr. Markby rose to retire, dimly perceiving that he had plunged a dagger into the young man's heart in his well-meant endeavor to comfort him.

"Muriel! Muriel!" groaned Arthur.

The solicitor paused outside of the door as he

closed it. He cocked his head on one side inquisitively.

"And who is Muriel, I wonder?" he murmured with a touch of emotion. "Dear, dear! I declare, I must have caught a cold."

Without stirring from his seat, Arthur Merivale took up a pen and wrote to that young lady. He told her briefly, stiffly of his father's death, his mother's illness, of his own plans. He asked her for her sympathy, and ended his note with these words: "You will forgive and forget, I know, the foolish things I said to you that last unhappy day of my visit." He always wondered why she never replied.

He must look after his mother and the property! That was what Mr. Markby had said and that was what he had told Muriel. Yes, that was what he had to do, and that was what he did right well. He squared his shoulders, set his lips, and did his duty. But the shock of these events and the strain to which his nature was now continually subjected wrought in the ensuing years a noticeable alteration in his character. Misfortune unerringly brings out the weak spots in a man, which prosperity may have concealed. Arthur Merivale had been hitherto one of the spoilt darlings of life. Brilliant, rich, successful, athletic, the world had been at his feet. He had known no failure, and accepted his easy

happiness as a right. The ambition that had leaped into being at the suggestion of a woman required a woman to guide it. For his was no practical ambition for the definite amelioration of any class, or the achievement of any dear project. It was a desire for personal advancement, a vain longing for fame. The life, therefore, he had now to live was intensely distasteful to him. He was, as he told Muriel, ambitious, and, in the sense that we have described, it was true. He had to curb his ambitions. Country-bred, he detested country life. He was in many ways perhaps too natural a man to care greatly for nature. Nature is the resource of the artificial.

The country, for him, was only tolerable as a background to town. If he had lived in town he would have been the first to subscribe to any Society for the Promotion of Open Spaces—but in the country he complained that there was nothing but open spaces. The country was so extreme. As a place to which one retires and plays cricket in or hunts or shoots, the country was admirable, he thought. But as a place in which to live year in, year out, in solitude, through the dark winters and the bitter springtime, sowing turnips or saving hay, buying stock, repairing farm buildings, and interviewing farm hands,—it was intolerable. And the eternal presence of his native mountains blighted

his boyish spirits; those mountains with their unending succession of storm and rain and wind and cloud and snow, with their towering, depressing vastness, their callous disregard of man, rendered him increasingly melancholy. It is only to visitors, as a rule, that the mountains bring peace. Those who dwell always amongst them hate them and the harsh weather they bring, as sailors hate the sea.

"I hate the mountains," said a Switzer to me once; "they make me feel blue"; and, "Mountains, I despise mountains," idiomatically observed one who had spent his life among the Rockies. Arthur Merivale could never leave them; he grew to loathe them in the silent loneliness of the night or in the noisy solitude of boisterous wind and storm. For in the long winter nights, amid the valleys and the mountains, when the sturdy estate-men, men of splendid physique in whom there should be no taint of degeneracy, so often, in their melancholy, fall an easy prey to alcoholism or walk deliberately to the cold, dark level of the lake and drown themselves, death itself appears less awful, and men grow to long for the peace of death. They think that being dead they will be rid at last of their own company; they go mad in their desperate desire to be freed from the presence of their own selves and the eternal presence of the indifferent mountains.

Merivale was not by nature a dreamer and action is the only resource of those who do not dream. But his ambition demanded ampler scope and a wider arena of action and publicity than could now be his. He had not the philosophy to content himself with less if he could not have all. He had to buy the experience which teaches us to cultivate our garden. The very selfishness of his ambition thwarted him. He might have done a thousand things in his limited sphere eminently worth doing. In a country of shepherds he might have introduced a sheep-dip; in a land of drunkenness he might have encouraged temperance; in a district of farmers, he might have taught the rudiments of modern farming. But for him the part of a social or agricultural reformer (than whom really there is no greater benefactor of mankind) was too apparently insignificant. The reward he sought was to be known. The love of action which he believed himself to possess was little more than the craving for repute. He had no inclination to do the uphill work of forcing benefits upon farmers unless he saw his way clearly to reaping a wide harvest of renown. To use his brains and education for the benefit of a parish or a section of it did not occur to him as a noble employment. He did, indeed, what he had to do, but without interest, much less with enthusiasm. He fretted persistently,

silently kicking against the pricks and not troubling himself with the petty politics of his province. Thus, then, rightly or wrongly, he had to deny himself his true interests in life, and he had been balked in the pursuit of his true love: but there were other influences at work also which warped his nature and conducted to make him, as people began to declare, "peculiar." The petty economies which he was obliged continually to practise galled his pride. He had his father's love of lavish entertainment and he had gratified and developed that taste at Oxford. Here, now, at home, in contrast to his father's open-handedness and the spendthrift habits of his own undergraduate days, he had to be mean and niggardly; he had to learn the bitterness of being a poor rich man. He could not keep up his proper position in the county and people thought him stingy: he could not afford to marry,—he had to pay too heavily towards the support and education of other people's wives and children,—and people sarcastically wondered why he was not a marrying man. Mothers who thought him eligible disliked him because he did not make love to their daughters but rather seemed to shun them, whilst those who had other schemes or guessed the truth about his affairs remarked complacently that it was a pity Arthur Merivale was so odd, he was so charming when he did come out of his shell and

stop clod-hopping for an hour. "But," one and all these mothers added, "but he is very good to his poor old mother." Others who were fond of him contented themselves with explaining his oddness by saying that he was a dear, good fellow, lovable and charming, but not, they feared, intended to be happy.

On his proud, sensitive nature, the strain of these experiences told with painful effect. He became more and more of a recluse: he developed the false modesty of accepting nothing in the way of hospitality from others because he could give nothing in return, a form of false modesty which is the worst sort of conceit and proves, if analyzed, to be really a kind of morose pride. As the years went by and he saw less and less of people, he grew morbidly disinclined to see them, as is so often the case with lonely dwellers in the country when they give way to the inertia which besets them and yield to the natural distaste of exerting themselves to perform their social duties or pleasures. Merivale was, from day to day, sufficiently occupied in the daytime with the estate and the care of his mother; at night he grew content with his own society and his own imaginings or the sweet converse of those dear friends, his books.

At one time he began to develop the undoubted

talent he had for painting, but his efforts were spasmodic and unsustained. He lacked the stimulus of competition or necessity, and the instigation of friendly criticism, without which the drudgery of art becomes intolerable. At another time he began to work, steadily at first and with enthusiasm, at an elaborate book which, to himself, he proudly called his "magnus opus"; the book which should justify his retirement to all his former friends and satisfy that ambition for fame and influence which gnawed at his heart. But by degrees his enthusiasm cooled off and he worked very rarely, very slowly at his book. A horrible all-pervading pessimism had overcome him and he laughed at his own efforts, on the principle that if you do anything you will find, when it is done, that it was not worth doing. It was about this time that he shocked a good lady who had been happy all her life, but was complaining that she had had to send for the doctor recently for the first time in sixty years.

"Well, at any rate," was Merivale's comment, "you are very lucky to have got over sixty years of it so well."

So for ten years he lived, ten dreary, interminable, despairing years which left their heavy mark on him in more ways than one.

* * * * *

Ten and a half years from the day on which we

first made his acquaintance, Arthur Merivale sat, alone and silent, in the smoking-room of his home in that lonely Cumberland valley. Ten years, only ten years later! But what a change had come over the frame and temperament of the clever, vigorous young athlete who had won the match at Prancehurst Manor. As he sat there that night, listening to the monotonous moaning in the chimney of the westerly gale, bowed with sorrow and disappointment, worn with grief and lonely watchings, you would have called him a man long past his prime, and learning that he was barely thirty would have reflected that age is indeed not a matter of years.

For the last six weeks the aged and crippled mother, to whom with uncomplaining devotion he had sacrificed his youth and hopes, had been gradually sinking. It was only through his unremitting care that she had been kept alive the last ten days. The end had been inevitably at hand, but his unflagging, devoted nursing had staved it off for several days beyond the allotted time. Now at last the struggle was over. That afternoon he had stood in the little country churchyard by the grave of her whom he had loved so well and whose dear ashes had been committed to the earth amid the rain and bluster of a warm autumnal gale. He had stood there dazed at his loss; dazed now he sat in his smoking-room, groping in the dark waters of

desolation, like some swimmer who knows not where land lies.

The wild west wind moaned and roared and roared and moaned in the chimney. The house shook from time to time as a squall of more than usual violence whistled through the gap and, striking the mansion, passed on its way screaming, struggling down the valley to escape from the imprisoning mountains. From time to time a freshet of warm rain was flung against the thick double windows and the noise of rushing water was audible in the room. It was the familiar room in which Merivale had spent so large a part of many years. But now, as, in his dazed endeavors to think, his eyes occasionally wandered over it, it seemed somehow changed, different. There was a new expression, an unwonted meaning in everything about him. The chairs, the tables, his sketches on the wall, all seemed to look at him with unfamiliar eyes. The angles of the chimney-piece had never seemed so sharply marked; the corners of the room seemed alert and full of intelligence. Were they curious of his sensation? Did they wonder that he stayed there alone, as usual, reading or pretending to read, as if nothing had happened? Was this the beginning of a new life for him, a reawakening from the torpor of years, a flowering of the spirit? Was the death of his beloved mother to prove the opening for him of a new

existence in which all things should appear more bright, more vivid ? He would be able to go at last—to get away, to travel; to visit the Continental galleries; to see Rome, the Immortal City, and Venice, the Enchantress; to wander with knapsack and sketch-book amid the snow-capped mountains and the green-blue lakes of Switzerland. Or was it that things seemed strange to him now because he was beginning to perceive for the first time how changed he himself was ? True, he was free to go, to lead the new life, the life of ambition and activity, irresponsible at last and unbound,—but he felt unable to do so. Yes, the deliverance, if it must be so termed, had come too late ! He was an old man now, he morbidly assured himself; prematurely he had fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf. His habits were formed, unalterably formed, he was sure : and chief among them the habit of regulating his life, his thoughts, his desires always in reference to the needs of the dear invalid whom he had lost.

He had indeed grown strangely old in these ten long years. Though he was not yet thirty-five years of age, he had the manner and appearance of a man of sixty rather. His manner had grown gentle beyond his years and he had adopted some of the eccentric tricks of dress which would appear almost inevitably to mark the man who lives little

in men's society. The round smoking-cap on his head, the worked carpet slippers on his feet, these and other outward signs, like the lack of briskness in his manner and of vigor in his voice, all pointed in the same direction. They marked the man who had not lived a man's life of action and command. To-night for the first time he was becoming dimly conscious of these things and he was morbidly distressed at his discoveries.

He had sacrificed his natural inclinations on the altar of filial affection. Had he done well? Of all moments in his life, if the choice had been his, he would have chosen this evening last of all as the occasion for such a reflection. But in spite of himself the question rose again and again within him and demanded loudly and more loudly an answer. He had wasted his youth, his talents, his happiness. Had he done right?

He laid down the book which he had been making a vain pretence of reading, and he took the green reading-shade from off his forehead and turned down the lamp. Thus for an hour or more he sat thinking in the corner of the long, dark room. The fire burned low in the grate; the storm of wind and rain blustered and roared outside; the mice, emboldened by the silent darkness of the room, came out from their holes, climbed up the waterproof covering of the billiard-table, and played among the

books and paint-brushes and tubes under which it groaned. Arthur Merivale heeded them not, for he was reviewing his past life and striving to silence with an affirmative answer that recurring question, —Had he done right ?

The position in which he had found himself, when his affairs evolved from the chaos in which they had been plunged, was that after paying his mother's jointure in full he was left with barely two hundred pounds a year of his own. Unless he had administered the estate himself, very carefully and without the aid of an agent, even his mother's jointure could not have been paid. As it was, by living very quietly, he had scarcely enough to pay his share of the household expenses. If he contented himself with this state of affairs he must necessarily give up all his ambitions of personal success in the great world, he must be cut off even from taking any practical part in the social life of the county, and he must give up all thoughts of marriage in his mother's lifetime. The alternative, he knew quite well, was easily within his reach. He knew that he had only to inform his mother of the true state of their affairs and then she—never for a moment had he any doubt of that—she would insist on everything being sacrificed to enable him to pursue some profession such as he had always desired, which might sooner or later make him

really independent and perhaps famous. But he was determined at all hazards to keep his mother in the dark with regard to his position. For in the first place he feared that the shock and grief which the knowledge of her husband's extravagances would cause her would poison for her in some degree the dearest memory she had; might even very probably in her precarious state of health shorten her life.

In the second place it would result, he foresaw, in his leaving her. She would insist on his leaving her in order that he might push his own fortunes. And the idea of that was intolerable to him. So, rightly or wrongly,—wrongly, I am sure, from the mother's point of view, rightly, perhaps, from the son's,—he determined to conceal the situation from her and he succeeded in keeping her in ignorance. Deliberately he set himself to crush his ambitions, to forget his love, and to devote himself to the nursing of his mother and the management of his little estate, an occupation which to others might have been eminently attractive but to him was an immense burden, an unceasing bore.

Such cases of self-sacrifice, when we hear of them, move our admiration, whether we think them really wise or not. "How good of him!" "How sweet of her!" we vaguely comment, and, half forgetting that they who do these things are people of

like passions with ourselves, we take comfort and excuse for our own selfishness from the supposition that it must have been easier for them to be thus self-denying than it would have been for us. But in most cases it is no easier. It is hard indeed to realize to the full what such self-sacrifice means. For instance, we do not as a rule understand what sacrifice the scholar makes when, in the enthusiasm of learning, he devotes his life to his work. It is not, be sure, without a struggle, without many a pang of bitterness and sigh of regret that such a man gives up his hopes of love, the joys of married life, and the sympathy of women to the service of intellect, the hope of fame, the joy of literary creation, and the satisfaction of proving other scholars wrong. But even such compensations as these were not within the reach of Arthur Merivale, nor was it in the hope of "building a monument more durable than brass" that he had seared his heart. He read and painted indeed as a man of taste and leisure will paint and read. But he had failed to do his "great work." The feeling that there was no hurry, the demoralizing knowledge that he had always, as he bitterly put it, all the time "between now and death," and the absence of stimulus in the form of necessity or competition and the lack of any woman to fix his ambition left him a mere dabbler, a dilettante amateur. One small volume

of poems, published by some purblind Barabbas, praised by the two or three critics who know good work from bad, and bought by a discriminating public to the extent of fifty-seven copies, was the only tangible result of his literary studies. But he had kept a keen though as yet theoretical interest in politics and had stored his mind with the treasures of political thought and wisdom in which English literature is so rich. Meantime he had endured with exemplary patience the trials that the deception he practised on his mother inevitably brought upon him. He had foreseen them and he was prepared for them, but they never lost their sting. How often had he flinched under his mother's exhortations to him to marry, or her sometimes querulous regrets that he did not cut such a figure in the county as his father had done. Why did he not go out more, entertain more, and give shooting parties like his father? It was so unlike a Merivale to be a recluse. Everybody said it was such a pity. Or occasionally she would remark on the smallness of his subscription to some charity. He was not so open-handed as his father had been, she would give him to understand, and she was sorry for it. And Arthur would be tempted to think with bitterness that his subscription meant the sacrifice of cigars for him while his mother's balance was piling up in the bank. To

fortify himself against such incidents as these and to stifle his own desires and inclinations he had gradually adopted, half unconsciously, a cynical, weary attitude towards life and its pleasures. Thus for many years he had succeeded more or less completely in arriving at the blessing which the whole human race strives after, not always wisely, but always obstinately, by means of drugs and drinks, of pleasure and toil,—the blessing of the forgetfulness of days and the rapid annihilation of life. To pass through the world unconscious of oneself, unaware of one's surroundings, and not tormented by unsatisfied desires, that is the ideal of the majority of mankind. It would run strictly contrary to their ideal to realize this fact. Their general attitude towards life is, in fact, exactly that of a man who holds his nose and swallows a dose of physic. But they do not know it. So Merivale argued, and so he had learnt to live and to endure his wounds from the stings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

But there was one wound in his heart always open, of which he was always conscious. Work as he would, drug his brain as he might by toiling at accounts, at farming, by reading, by painting, and by sitting up night after night by his mother's side, still and always and ever more clearly shone the image of his beloved Muriel before his eyes. Do

what he would, work as he would, he could not dull the light of love that burned in his heart. Nay, rather, the more he endeavored to stifle the fire, the brighter and more persistently the flames leaped up. It is more common for a woman than for a man to live thus faithful to one love, but neither sex, in spite of the poets, has a monopoly of faith or fickleness. In these many years his memory of her had grown dim in detail, but Muriel lived in Arthur's memory as the vague but unquestioned personification of all that, on one side of life, he desired. She, and she only, was for him the sweet sympathizer he lacked in his joys and woes; she and only she was the ideal companion for good days and bad days and everyday days; hers was the one human hand he longed to clasp, hers the one voice he longed to hear, hers the one human heart he longed, though vainly, to call his own. To-night more strongly than ever he desired her presence as more than ever before he needed her sympathy. What had become of her, he wondered. Should he try to find out and see her again? No, no! he told himself. What was the use? Of course she had forgotten him long ago: probably she had married some other fellow by this time—he hardly ever read the papers and living in that out of the way hole he would not be likely to hear about it. No, no. He would n't begin that

game again. It would only bring him more pain and disappointment.

A loud rat-tat on the front door roused Merivale from his melancholy reverie. He started up from his chair and looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock.

"Then drew his dial from his poke, and gazing at it with lack lustre eye, said, very wisely: It is ten o'clock," he quoted, and added:

"The words fit my case all right. H'm. I have had a very bad hour, a very bad hour indeed. I am growing old and morbid. Hang it. I must do something. That must be the post, I suppose. It is awfully late to-night, and no wonder, with such a storm blowing! Of course, the servants are n't about. I must open the door myself."

He picked up an old brass lamp that had once been used for lighting Venetian nobles from their gondolas to their palaces. He opened the little brass door of it and lit the candle within. Then he made his way out into the dark hall and undid the heavy fastenings of the front door. As he opened it a terrific gust of wind wrenched the door from his hand and banged it against the wall of the hall. Merivale himself was nearly thrown off his balance by the violent squall, and the postman who was standing on the doorstep waiting had his cap whirled off his head high into the tall laurel bushes

that fringed the drive. The man ran to look for it and presently returned after a fruitless search.

"Have you found it?" asked Merivale.

"Na," replied the postman, "but dinna fash yersel. A doot a 'll find it in t' morning."

"Come in here for a minute and I 'll get one of mine to lend you, then," said Merivale.

"Na, thank ye, sir," the postman answered. "This is just the end of ma round and a 'll do fine without t' hat till morning. Aye, but yon room looks snug this weather and mebbe," he added with a touch of homely sympathy for Merivale's loss, "mebbe you 'll not be too lonely a-settin' there a-writin' your books. Ah, but a would n't like to be a scribbling beggar mysel'. Ma missis was sayin' to me only to-day—talking of you, sir, too—'It would tak' ye to put your brains in steep to be an author, John,' she sez. And so it would. Ha, ha! Here 's your letters, sir, and beggin' your pardon. Why, there 's only one. Queer thing, now, a was sure there was two on 'em. Well, good-night, sir."

The light-hearted fellow trampled away, squelching down the drive. Another tremendous swirl of wind dashed across the house and swept that other letter, which it had previously stolen from her Majesty's mails, what time it had unbonnetted her postman, swept and hurled it in a mad dance across

the fields, tossing it in the air and bowling it along the ground till it finally fell and rotted among the short, angry waves of the deep, dark lake.

Merivale knew nothing of this. He forced back the door and returned to his smoking-room. "Yes," he said aloud, as he put down the lamp and blew out the candle of it, "I have had enough of this. I am growing old and morbid here. It's all my own fault. I ought to have done something before. There was lots of opportunity here in a small way, only I was forever desiring 'this man's art and that man's scope,' instead of making the best of it. Well, I've had enough! I'll start next week for a jolly good ramble on the Continent. That will clear away the cobwebs and teach me to be young again and strong and vigorous and cheerful and sociable once more. Oh, I've had enough of this. Afterwards, when I'm myself again, I'll *do* something at last. I swear I will! Why should n't I? I am quite free now, any way. Not lonely? Good Lord, if they only knew *how* lonely!"





CHAPTER III

AN IMAGINATIVE GIRL

AND Muriel Bowness? What of her? She had loved Arthur Merivale and she loved him still. Not till she had heard those few words of passion from him that sweet summer's afternoon in the old orchard, not till she had felt his passionate grasp of her hand had she known it. Then, as in a flood of light, the truth revealed itself to her dazzled reason, and, seeing it, she knew that she loved him and him only and that she must love him all her life long. The echo of his low, rich tones, vehement yet pleading, sounded ever in her ears and vibrated in her memory, as the notes of a violin persist when the player has laid aside his bow, or the odor of some delicate flower which was worn by a departed guest. Bitterly her warm, sympathetic soul grieved for him in his loss. She longed to write to him and send him words of comfort, but she dared not. In thought she sent him loving messages of consolation and poured forth the

tenderness of her aching spirit in the caresses of imagined phrases. But before she wrote she would wait for a letter from him in which he would tell her of his sorrow and affliction and make clear, also, his love for her.

The letter arrived at last. In a few cold words he told her of his great loss and of his mother's illness. He should have to live at home now, he added, and look after her and the place. "You will forgive and forget, I know, the foolish things I said to you that last unhappy day of my visit." That was all. The letter came as a cruel shock to Muriel's tender imaginings. By feeling it so deeply she realized how deeply she loved him and how confidently, how ardently, she had waited for his full announcement of his love. Only by silence could she answer him, but that silence was for her filled with loud protests against him she loved, who had treated her thus brutally, callously. So she at first bitterly argued. And then, after the first sharpness of resentment was over, her tender sympathy began to make excuses for him. Such is the way of women. Their charitable fondness leads them often into the paths of truth whilst the cynical judgments of men go blindly astray. Muriel began to suspect something of the true state of affairs; to believe that Arthur was not merely light and fickle but bound by his position.

And now and again a stray word of news from friends in the North confirmed her suspicions. With the happy optimism of her sweet nature she was ready to wait till he was free. She knew in her heart that he had been really in earnest and she believed that she knew enough of his nature to trust in his earnestness. For why else did she love him, if not because his was the strong, kind nature of abiding love? And what should guide us in these matters but the dictates of our heart? So the happy, imaginative girl told herself she was content to wait. It should be for him to come some day and woo her again.

He would come some day, and ask for her, claim her; till he so came, she would live her own life patiently and wait for him, to share his. Meanwhile she passed her days in strange, imaginative communion with him. She thought of him always and in her solitude talked with him, ever catching fancifully at the pleasure which his presence might give; vaguely desiring him, yet knowing not why, and not having him, almost content with her fancy that she had.

Her pure love-dreams of the day were continued in pure, sweet dreams at night; pure, sweet dreams, which came and went deliciously; delicate, noiseless, shadowy dreams, without passion, without pain; phantom heralds of unknown delight, hovering

round her and faintly whispering of unimagined mystic pleasures; shy visitors from a land of fantasy, that dared not speak aloud, but in hushed, harmonious silence fled back within the ivory portals whence they came; dreams like the beating of white wings over the snow-strewn plains of sleep.

So she waited for him and unconsciously nursed her love till he should come. If she suffered from her love she would not willingly have been rid of her suffering. A subtle change came over her mind and temperament as a result of this imaginary communion with her love. Her real life began to seem less real and the everyday facts and events of her world gradually lost their importance. She found the doings of Mrs. A. no longer so piquantly amusing as of yore, and the opinion of Mrs. B. ceased to carry weight. The admiration of her young cousin, Willie Bowness, left her unmoved, save that it stirred within her an unselfish sympathy for his feelings, which led her to be as nice to him as she could. She was shocked and a little hurt when he proposed to her—it was so strange that he should not understand that there was no room in her heart for any one now. It was so clear to her that she forgot that it was not at all clear to anybody else. People, in fact, began to call her "vague," but Willie Bowness spoke very bitterly of her as a heartless little flirt. People began also to vote her

not a little dull and they added that it was a great pity and a curious thing, for she used to be so bright. The fact was that her inner life, the life of her imagination, was more and more absorbing her energies and her interest. She bestowed upon it and the scenes she conjured up for herself all the art and humor and vivacity that had formerly been lavished on the opinion of Mrs B. and the doings of Mrs. A.

She had always been fond of reading and especially of reading poetry. It was in poetry now that she began to find her happiest moments. As she reread the old favorites she began to discover new meanings in them, deeper notes to which her heart had before been utterly unresponsive, richer rhythms to which her ear had been deaf, emotions ampler and more splendid than the pleasure of mere intellectual brilliancy which they had been wont to yield her. Love, as it deepened her nature, developed her imagination.

She did not mope,—far from it. She played tennis as readily and as well as ever, could still talk cricket shop with anybody, and she performed her various little duties in the village as punctiliously and as cheerfully as ever. But whereas before Arthur Merivale came into her life these things and the occasional excitement of a visit to London or a dance at a neighboring country house had been

the chief pleasures of her life, now the happiest moments were those in which she was alone—yet not alone. To wander out by herself, book in hand, in the stillness of the dawn or amid the peaceful murmurings of a summer's eve; to listen as she lay in some secure nook to the first stirrings of nature, the first short, timid piping of the birds, or to the beetle's booming drone in his homeward flight when the day was done; so to listen till the country changed by imperceptible degrees into another realm, and the familiar landscape passed for her into one yet more familiar—this was her greatest happiness. For as she came into this new land, there advanced always to join her, with the sunlight playing about his hair and shoulders, and a smile of glad welcome upon his lips, the Ruler, the Genius of the Place, the man she loved and idealized — Arthur Merivale. He came to her always, uttering never a word of rebuke, never striking a discordant note in their perfect harmony, but talking with an irresistible, inexhaustible charm and a brilliant, happy, playful wit, inspiring her too to talk wittily, charmingly. He came to her thus, and so readily that she half believed, nay, she was sure, that he whom her imagination revealed to her so vividly must in some sort share in that revelation and, she even dared to hope, rejoice in that communion.

Together, they would wander hand-in-hand, through the flowering meadows of their kingdom, through the lotus-bearing lawns of dreamland made musical by the low vibration of his wonderful voice, planning great schemes for the happiness of those they loved or talking with the people they met, the heroes and heroines of romance, creations of the poet's dream, their subjects and companions. Little Melchizedeks, without father, without mother, they would spring up unbidden in her brain, people with their presence and fill with the sound of their voices the room of her solitary and retired imagination.

Or in the seclusion of her own bedroom she would coil herself up in snug, unbecoming attitudes before the fire and there, cheek in hand, the fitful firelight flashing in her eyes, she would read the romance of chivalry and the poetry of romance. At first, as she read, the rhythm and assonance and the echoing swing of the verses, all the glorious harmonies which men have made with words, would stir her blood and delight her senses. Then the scenes which the poet described would, by degrees, present themselves clearly in her mind. Her conception of them, indeed, seldom corresponded exactly with the descriptions of the poet, for they were always places well known to her already from her wanderings in the land where Arthur and she were

king and queen. In this kingdom, whereof every stream, every path, every copse, every ravine, was so familiar to her, there was always some spot which the poet seemed to have had in mind and to have endeavored to describe. *She* knew the scene he hinted at, *she* knew it in every detail. Then the persons of the poem would impose themselves upon her imagination. With increasing vividness she beheld those golden people moving through the realms of gold, talking, struggling, laughing, suffering, loving. Ah! she knew them, too, intimately, and understood them. For were they not all her subjects and fellow-countrymen from the land in which she and Arthur reigned?

Then the book of poems would fall from her hand. She was back once more in her kingdom. The characters suggested by the poet stepped out from the book. So intensely had she visualized them that they had become her own living companions. They lived and moved and had their being in her brain; they talked and acted, developed scenes, and strutted out their little hour in her imagination.

Thus through the happy night she would dream on, till the fire burned low and her eyes grew heavy and her limbs stiff, so that it was at last necessary to move. The movement perhaps would break the spell and the dear companions of her fantasy would leave her and she would creep into bed, stiff, half-

frozen, half-asleep. Or sometimes the spell would be broken in a fashion quite other than this. She did not understand, or for a long time attempt to understand why it was—she had not in those days acquired the middle-aged taste for biography and knew very little of the lives of the poets ; she knew nothing of opium and less of scandal—but occasionally as she turned the leaves of a volume of poetry she would come across a poem, or a few lines only, it might be, of a poem which intoxicated her. By some subtle quality of sound, by some indescribable beauty of ethereal suggestiveness, they roused in her a frenzy of almost unbearable delight. Her brain would seem to catch fire at the flame of those burning words and her self-restraint to vanish at the sound of that unearthly music.

She would leap to her feet and let down her long hair about her waist and walk up and down her room, thrilling with joy, brandishing a hair-brush, maybe, in one hand, and those maddening verses in the other, declaiming them, whispering them, thinking them, even laughing over them for very pleasure, until from sheer fatigue she could no more. She would fall asleep at last with a smile of happy exhaustion on her lips, her dark tresses wildly tossing over the contours of her shapely shoulders.

“ For she on honey-dew had fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.”

Muriel's fondness for reading was generally regarded by her family as rather queer. Her intellectual life was not in any way encouraged by those with whom she lived. Hers was not one of those English country homes where literature in a quiet, unobtrusive fashion permeates the atmosphere adding charm and scope to conversation and harmonizing the interests of home; where, in fact, books are as naturally and essentially a part of existence as the library is part of the house. Books, on the contrary, were not much read and still less mentioned at Prancehurst. Ted Bowness had indeed taken his degree at Oxford, but, as he used to say, "under protest." With the exception of *Handley Cross*, his criticism of all books was short and simple. They were all, in his opinion, "bally rot." Mr. Bowness was one of those men who are too busy ever to do anything in particular, and Mrs. Bowness was too lazy to have time to read. Muriel, therefore, found little sympathy at home with her tastes and enthusiasms and she had no very intimate girl friend in whom she could exactly confide or with whom she could discuss such subjects and certainly be understood. She had to rely, therefore, to an unusual degree on her own initiative and her own resources in these matters and it was perhaps for these very reasons that, under the stimulus of her first experience in love, her powers

of appreciation and of imagination were so strongly and suddenly developed.

Meanwhile her outward life flowed on at first very calmly. Ted hunted and played cricket and flirted with any girl who came his way. Mr. Bowness, except when the House was sitting, pottered about his estate; composed long letters to the local papers, and waged somewhat undignified warfare with the neighboring town over questions of right of way. He was also, by keeping silent, gradually building up a reputation as an authority on short-horns.

Muriel hunted and played cricket with Ted when he would let her, did, in fact, everything that was being done,—and always religiously read the local papers. But apart from these pleasures and duties her inner life was her own and her one great happiness. She was like some lonely sentinel of intellect keeping watch and ward in that pleasant land of Philistinism which was her home. True, she would have been the first to disdain any such position.

Nobody interfered with her tastes, except occasionally Mr. Bowness, who would sometimes feebly protest against her spending half her income on books.

Now one day there came a break in the monotony of her existence. A small, very trivial event occurred, which was fraught with tremendous

consequence for her. It was nothing more than the chance reading of a review in a weekly paper. The review was not well written, and it was not very complimentary. The subject of it was a book of poems with the somewhat affected title, *Poments—Lyrical Moods and Poems of the Moment*, by Arthur Merivale. Muriel sat down at once and wrote a post-card to her bookseller ordering a copy. Then, till the book came, she occupied herself in wondering what it would be like. She read the review again. It told her very little. It was evidently written by one of those reporters who masquerade as critics. It was easy to see that he had found himself in the presence of a mind which he could not understand, and therefore desired but was half afraid to condemn. In order to hide his inability to estimate the talent of the poet, he had quoted Longfellow, referred familiarly to Robert Browning, remarked sagely that Merivale was not Shakespeare, but that Shelley was a lyrical singer of sublime inspiration. Then he had filled up the rest of his review with quotations from *Poments*—and for this Muriel was thankful. For this book was the first fact in the history of her romance; this was the first message that had come to her from that Cumberland recluse since his cold, cruel letter those many, many months ago. She would learn from it at length something of the real cast of

Merivale's mind. She thought too that she would be able to discover from it whether he was faithful to her all this time, or whether she had been building castles in the air; whether in fact all her delicious imaginings and delightful communings with him were nothing but the idle fancies of a sentimental girl. Had she been nourishing a foolish love on empty dreams? Was there no more foundation in fact for her idea that he was waiting, waiting always to come and claim her, than there was for the daily companionship with him which she had so vividly imagined and jealously claimed? Perhaps he had altogether forgotten her—was himself quite altered—and was writing little love poems to another girl or other girls. The idea passed through her brain, stinging her sharply, and it struck a sudden, unbearable twinge of pain through her heart. But she would not allow it to remain—she dismissed it with a strong effort of will. However, she waited with all the more impatience and some little dread for the arrival of the book. From that, she was sure, she could divine his thoughts, his feelings, however unconscious he might be of having expressed them in his poems; from them she was sure she could discover the true Arthur Merivale.

The book came at last. It was brought up to her room in the morning with her tea, when she

was called. For the post arrived early at Prancehurst and was always delivered in this fashion. As soon as she saw the book Muriel knew that there was only one thing to do. She must go out with it to one of her favorite haunts, spend the day with it in solitude and, by herself, get to the heart of the poet's meaning. She drank her tea, dressed hurriedly, put a few biscuits in her pocket, and hastened forth. It was a glorious June morning; already the warmth of the sun was making itself felt and the scent of the new-mown hay was abroad in the fields. She passed rapidly through the Park, leaving on her left a copse in which the birds were twittering their full-throated, melodious song and the delicate light green underwoods were trembling in the faint breeze of dawn. She came to her favorite nook just within the edge of a covert on the hill, overlooking a huge field in which the hay-cocks gleamed purple through the mist which foreshadowed the heat of the day. She settled herself comfortably with her back against an old elm and feverishly she fingered the modest little volume. She was at first too excited to read it consecutively: she could not wait to cut the leaves; she peeped in haphazard; and, when here and there her curiosity was aroused by some lines on the preceding page, she would hold open the uncut pages and read them thus in her impatient eagerness. Gradually

the feverishness of her investigations ceased and an air of calm, gratified content took the place of her excited, half-fearful expression. Of the merit of the book she had not attempted to judge, and yet it was borne in upon her that it was in many ways beyond the common. The spirit of a pure but somewhat melancholy imagination refined by scholarship breathed through the poems. Occasionally, indeed, the sentiment was a little overstrained and the mastery of metre was not quite perfect. But what of that? What touched Muriel and drew from her that sigh of relief and filled her with that sense of happy security was the certainty that she and she only had inspired those lines, that sentiment. The moments of his life that he had lyricized were hers as well as his, his through her. Better still, he loved her as she desired to be loved; he understood her as she wished to be understood. Her reveries had not misled her; she had not wandered in the ways of her imagination, her meetings with him in the land of fantasy had not deceived her. He *was* the true, the faithful Prince Charming of her dreams, and behold, from the silence of the dream-land he had sent her a book which was both a message and a confession. She understood and she was filled with pity for him in his loneliness. So she floated off in a reverie into those imaginary realms in which she reigned with him. She

saw herself advance to meet him, as he came down to her in the fresh glory of his youth. She stretched out her hands to take his whilst she thanked him for his poems. Then the question rose on her lips : “ But why had he not sent her a copy ? ” She checked herself as she asked. She understood so well the meaning of that yearning, wistful smile, that deep, tender look in his eyes. He might not speak to her in real life as in their imagined life he did speak. And for the same reason, just because she had inspired it so wholly, just because he did love her so faithfully, in real life he could not send her this book. Oh ! She understood !

And then she came back to herself—to that real life which is so difficult, to the actual facts which are, often, so hard. She picked up the little book with gentle care and walked slowly, thoughtfully, home, filled with a burning sense of gratitude. And about her mouth played the happy smile, in her eyes shone the tender gladness of the Dreamer.

Suddenly her brows puckered with thought. She was searching for an answer to the question which had arisen in her mind—How could she reply to him ? Suddenly again her face brightened with a smile of joy. Was it he who had suggested the thought long before during one of their rambles in the land that was theirs ? Or why was it that the answer seemed so complete, so perfectly to fulfil all

the latent, half-articulate desires of her heart? It came to her like the echo of an answer that had once been given and then forgotten to a question put vaguely and not wholly understood by the inquirer. *She would write a book herself in answer to his.* Once the idea had come to her she saw how inevitably all her past experience had been leading up to that. To give expression to her dreams would be to send the perfect, unmistakable consoling message to him in his loneliness and would in itself be for her the completest joy of her life. To write,—that was to produce as a living entity into the world the life that lay hidden in her brain; to write,—that was to give birth to the embryo being that leaped within her and of late in its growth had been clamoring for admission to the light and air of the world. She had dreamed very happily. The call had now come for her to awake and record her dreams. And she welcomed the call.

A sentimental, imaginative girl, you will say. Yes, but also a lovable and a loving.





CHAPTER IV

A FIRST ATTEMPT

THAT matter of writing a book proved not nearly so easy as Muriel had expected. What had seemed so beautiful, so harmonious, when vaguely imagined, became on paper, under her unpractised fingers, without sound or sense, effect or form. To her it was so natural, so simple, so effortless an accomplishment to talk well, to imagine vividly, that it came with a great shock to her to find that it was almost impossible to reproduce on paper her thoughts and conversation. Undeniably it was the case that when she strove to express the scenes and experiences through which she had lived in her pleasant kingdom of dreams and which in her imagination she remembered and realized so intensely, then the charm and reality of them almost vanished. The flow of her thoughts had never before been interrupted; now the creaking of the mere mechanism of writing seemed to give them pause. The sentences, as she wrote, straggled in unshapely

procession across the page, without proportion, disorderly. They jibbed like cab horses on a rank and backed into each other, spoiling one another's peace and causing even those which had been left to themselves as most docile to start out of place and break the line. As with sentences, so with words. The right words eluded her grasp, dancing before her like will-o'-the-wisps; then, when seized and used once, these same words insisted on being used in every succeeding sentence. Insidiously they reappeared, calling to each other across wastes of manuscript and laughing with demoniac merriment at her vain efforts. The very phrases which were so smooth and glib on her tongue or in the mouth of her imaginary interlocutor, when they were written grew swollen and awkward and stiffened unaccountably before her eyes. The scenes, too, which had seemed so exquisite and self-sufficient as they sprang up in her dreams were now, when written, too often unconvincing, and for the reader, she saw, unmeaning. It was not so easy after all, she was obliged to acknowledge, this matter of writing a book. And yet it seemed so simple a thing when done by others.

Was she deceiving herself in thinking that she had something to say if she could only get it said, better worth saying than the utterances of most of these authors? Or was she only suffering the agony which is the lot of every true artist when he surveys

his handiwork and notes, as he must, the evaporation of his ideal during the process of its precipitation? There was something of that no doubt in her disappointment, but she quickly realized that her failure was due to inexperience and want of practice. And being a woman, writing, according to her quixotic fancy, for the sake of the man she loved, she persevered with all the infinite fervor, the unremitting faith of her sex when they are stirred by ambition of whatever sort. There was no faltering, no going back, no getting tired in her case. With quiet determination, unaided, undaunted, she persevered in her labor of love. The result was that the book, the one book, as she thought at the time, of her life, gradually emerged from inarticulate chaos, took shape, and began to be moulded into a living work of art. The miracle of Pygmalion and Galatea is never out of date.

Thus her private hours were occupied in a happy if sometimes supremely disappointing struggle for expression, and her outer life went smoothly, serenely as before, interrupted only by the occasion of her brother's wedding. Apart from the natural excitement with which the bustle and strangeness of a marriage always fills a female breast, that event caused Muriel little pleasure. It was very unfortunate that her brother's wife was absolutely unsympathetic. She did not understand Muriel at all;

did not and could not offer the lonely girl that kind of intellectual companionship of which she was so completely destitute and so greatly, if unconsciously, in need. But Muriel was beginning to see before her the day of great happiness on which her work would be finished and she could try to get her "message," as she fondly called it, published, when suddenly a cruel, double blow befell her. Within a fortnight Death, who had never before come near her home in her lifetime, struck twice at the Bowness family. Mr. Bowness was laid low with a chill—pneumonia supervened. He was dead before Muriel realized the possibility of such a calamity, and he was followed to the grave by his wife, who had caught her death from his dying lips.

Apart from the acute grief of her personal loss the shock to Muriel was terrible. For a while it dried up in her all interest in her work and all energy to pursue it. She began, with the slightly morbid conscientiousness that such shocks often induce, to doubt for a little time whether that secret life of hers had not been something of a breach of confidence with her lost parents, was not, in some sort, a guilty pleasure. There was another fact more tangible and again more harassing which interrupted for a while the course of her imagination and the progress of her work. On the death of his father and mother, Ted Bowness and his wife naturally

took up their residence at Prancehurst. The question arose, What was to become of Muriel? She must live somewhere with some one and her sister-in-law rather markedly refused to suggest that she should stay on at Prancehurst. Thus it came about that for some time Muriel's fate hung in the balance between two aunts—a great-aunt, and a less. The latter, Lady Solightly, the wife of an M. P., a woman of extraordinary charm and kindness, devoted to politics and much given to entertaining politicians, wrote and proposed that Muriel should come and live with her in London, but Muriel shrank from the idea. She was wedded to her own quiet life in the country and she had a great dread of changing it for the rush and slavery of society. In her present mood she would have hated the feverish movement of London life; the vain excitement, the metropolitan pretence of amusement, would have been an abomination unto her: new hats and dresses and the visits of acquaintances she could not away with. Besides, apart from the fascination of her own inner life which could only be continued in the solitude of a country existence, she was immensely fond of Prancehurst and all its surroundings. There all her interests and all her hopes of happiness lay; there were centred all the remembrance of her own happy childhood and of the dear ones she had lost.

When, therefore, her great-aunt Dorcas suggested to Ted that he should place the Dower House at her disposal and that Muriel should live there with her, she was genuinely anxious for the arrangement to be made and grateful to her brother when he readily agreed to it. Not that she expected Miss Cantling to prove by any means an ideal companion, but in her delight at the prospect of being able to live on practically at her old home and in the country she loved, she half forgot, perhaps, how difficult a person that lady was reputed to be. It was very likely as well that this was so. For if she had objected her objections would probably have been overruled. Aunt Dorcas had a strong will when she saw reason for exerting it and she would almost certainly have managed Muriel as easily as, she complacently reflected, she had managed Lady Solightly. For she pointed out to Lady Solightly as soon as she heard of the rival arrangement, that Providence had intended her for the post of guardian to poor Muriel. ("These people," Lady Solightly humorously reflected to Sir Philip when she recounted the scene, "these people always have a monopoly of the decrees of Providence, and of course old maids are always the best authorities on the education of children.") Miss Cantling had further remarked that she had always disapproved of the way in which the dear child was being

brought up—it was so bad for a girl of her age to have her way in everything. Lady Solightly must see that London life was out of the question for Muriel at present and would in fact be just the thing to spoil her irrevocably. ("So complimentary to us, my dear," Sir Philip had commented.) As for herself, Miss Cantling had continued, she had no interest in the matter: her ideal was and always had been a quiet, independent existence, such as, thank God, she had hitherto enjoyed. But she was sure that dear George, if he had been alive, would have wished her to take charge of his poor little orphan girl and she only desired to do her duty and fulfil his wishes, at whatever cost, at whatever sacrifice to her own selfish inclinations. She managed to convey also, or rather to assume, in her discussions of the question, that Lady Solightly was really quite obviously unfitted for the task.

Lady Solightly inwardly commented on Aunt Dorcas with her well-bred, charitable humor, and gave way. But she would not have done so had she not gathered from Muriel that she desired in her heart of hearts above all to live on in her native countryside.

Before long, therefore, Muriel and Aunt Dorcas found themselves settled in the pretty little cottage on the confines of Prancehurst Park which was dignified with the name of the Dower House. Muriel soon

found that her companion was indeed not ideal. A thin, badly dressed, hard-bitten little person of sixty years, as uninteresting as she was uninterested, Aunt Dorcas had never by nature been beautiful; years and increasing discretion had enabled her to strengthen if possible her natural immunity from the temptations that beset the paths of those who are accursed, as she so pleasantly put it, with physical attractiveness. She had also developed and indulged with much success her secret disposition to be disagreeable, to displease. Her life at the Dower House of Prancehurst Manor suited her admirably. It suited her so well that she was able continually to point out its disadvantages without in the least suffering from them. She was always far too busy to be charitable; for all the time she could spare from spoiling her cats she devoted to scolding, gibing, or nagging at her niece. She never could understand how other people she could name found time to waste over gowns, or books, or travelling, or politics, or good works. *She*, she observed, was content to be a Christian. She was, to tell the truth, quickly recognized as something of a Tartar. That is to say, she was usually described in female circles as "a dear old thing—but rather a trial to live with, my dear!" Others, however, who were less charitable, carried that metaphor a step further and baldly denounced her as a judgment.

This phrase was very successful with them, for, besides condemning her, it managed also to cast some reflection upon Muriel, implying, as it did, that she deserved her great-aunt. Men, in their more downright fashion, were usually content to call Miss Cantling an old cat, a vixen, or a vile old vinegar cruet, according to the extent of their vocabulary, and so be done with it. To Muriel, even to sweet-tempered Muriel, she was indeed a trial and a constant one. Mentally, indeed, she marked her down as a Chancery Case. But they never quarrelled. Muriel always managed—though the effort was sometimes beyond the strength of good nature—to take her acid remarks and spiteful criticisms and peevish resentments in good part. Her charming sense of humor came to her aid. She felt, she used to confide to her friends when they openly wondered how she could stand it, she felt that it would be absurd to quarrel with her great-aunt.

To do Miss Cantling justice, she was disagreeable to Muriel partly on principle. She considered that the girl had been spoilt and allowed to run wild. Run wild, her manners would need attending to; her conceit must need correction. That, even before she had come to live with her, was quite clear to Aunt Dorcas, and with a perfectly honest prejudice she made up her mind to treat Muriel on these lines, without in the least understanding what sort

of a girl she had to deal with, and never all her days perceiving how galling and how ludicrously unnecessary her treatment was. Little misunderstandings of this kind wreck the happiness of too many households and add to the needless miseries of life. Our treatment of each other should be audited by conscience every quarter, or at least at Christmas. Once a year, at least, if not once a day, we ought to overhaul our behavior. Once a year at least we ought to work ourselves into a mood of sympathetic indulgence and try to see some good in our relatives—even in our wives. And if in the course of such a review we should happen to strike upon some unnoticed virtue, some unexpected charm, surely we might reward it during the coming day or quarter or the ensuing year by a merciful mitigation of ourselves. But Aunt Dorcas cared for none of these things. It was the essence of her to be unmitigated.

She disapproved—and Aunt Dorcas's disapproval was never a mild matter—of Muriel's indulgence in hunting and athletics on the one hand and on the other of her curious taste for reading. She was not in the least surprised to find, she quickly informed Muriel, that she was a clumsy needlewoman. In her days girls attended to their embroidery and did not play games like tom-boys, and they had no time to go mooning away over books. By steadily and

good humoredly ignoring these remarks and others of a kindred nature Muriel was enabled to continue her pursuits without too violent friction, but they were none the less a source of continual irritation. The result was that, after some months, during which the shock of her great loss and the strangeness of her new surroundings had interrupted her work and her imaginative life, she felt once more and with increasing force the necessity of returning to them. And as the necessity was keenly felt and the loneliness of her position was brought home to her, so was her delight in her resource more exquisite and her gratitude great to him who had revealed it and inspired her with love. And such gratitude is one of the highest attributes of the lover. Under these conditions, then, Muriel threw herself once more into her work with redoubled energy and as the months flew by the book drew to its conclusion. Gradually it had taken a form that satisfied her natural taste. She knew little and cared less for canons of criticism and popular requirements. Only her instincts demanded that her book should be an organic whole and informed by one central idea in obedience to which the characters should inexorably develop, and apart from which everything, however charming, must be considered superfluous and irrelevant. Heroically she sacrificed her purple patches and many of her most

imaginative passages to her artistic instinct and with a splendid patience she schooled herself to express perfectly what she imagined and to write only to the point. At last she was beginning to have her reward. The book lay before her as good as she could make it and now almost completed. One of the days which will always figure among the most vividly remembered of her life was that wonderful Saturday (it was just the thing that ought to happen on a Saturday, she remarked afterwards) on which it remained for her to write the concluding pages. She had worked late the night before and she got up that morning burning with a feverish impatience to finish her task. She saw with a sensation of relief that it was raining. A wet day was just what she wanted for an excuse to sit in and write. She could hardly contain her excitement when she went down to breakfast, but she did her best to restrain herself, for she knew that Aunt Dorcas was watching her. The rain called for comment, but Muriel did not know what to say about it; Aunt Dorcas was waiting for her.

Aunt Dorcas was one of those curiously constituted people who assume a personal responsibility for the rain and feel uneasy, guilty almost, when it snows. These people take the weather under their wise protection and regard abuse of it as a personal insult. They grow quite angry if those who live

with them do not approve of what is provided, but comment according. As for themselves, they are quite content in the happy assurance that, where they are, everything must be for the best and of the best. If you complain that it is stiflingly hot or snowing abominably or raining as usual, they are ready for you; they inform you with satisfaction that it is snowing in Nova Scotia, or hailing in Kamchatka, or very stuffy in the Red Sea.

Muriel, therefore, when she came into the breakfast-room this morning, held her peace. She merely went to the fire and warmed her hands, waiting till the coffee was brought in. She was quite content that it should rain to-day, but she did not dare to say so. For Aunt Dorcas never liked to be forced to admit that it was raining. On the other hand, this was a day on which the fact might easily have been confessed. A gust of wind hurled a spurt of rain against the panes. Muriel looked up. Aunt Dorcas looked up also from her paper in which she had been reading, stiffly silent.

"I see they have a blizzard in America," she said, severely, with a note of challenge in her voice.

"Ah!" replied Muriel, guardedly, "so like them! But I hope they will keep it to themselves."

"You can't call this a blizzard," Aunt Dorcas challenged her again.

"This? Oh, no! This is quite English!" Muriel retorted, with a merry laugh.

"I do not approve of people who sneer at their own country," said Aunt Dorcas, sourly. "In my young day England, yes, and English weather was good enough for us all."

"That was because blizzards had not been invented then, I suppose?" Muriel enquired, demurely.

"The young people of the present day—" Aunt Dorcas began, but luckily the coffee arrived at that moment and the incident, as the diplomats say, was closed.

"What are you going to do to-day?" asked Aunt Dorcas, presently.

"I must go up to the village to take some jelly to Mrs. Robinson first and then I shall write _____"

"Write? I can't imagine what you are always scribbling about. A child like you cannot have many correspondents, surely. At any rate, they cannot want to be bothered with your letters so often. You should have more consideration for other people. Still, it is none of my business, I suppose. But as for going to the village this morning whilst this shower lasts, I never heard of such an idea. You really must not be so foolish. You can send Thomas quite well, or the gardener,—

gardeners are naturally out of doors; in fact, I believe they like the rain——”

“ I am afraid I ought to go myself,” Muriel interposed. “ You see, Mrs. Robinson would be disappointed at not seeing me. I promised to call this morning——”

“ Nonsense, child!” was the sour retort; “ so long as Mrs. Robinson gets her jelly, you don’t suppose she cares whether she sees you or not? It will make no difference to her who brings it.”

The acid satisfaction which Aunt Dorcas derived from this double thrust at Mrs. Robinson’s greed and Muriel’s conceit caused her to relapse into comparative amiability during the rest of the breakfast-time.

But Muriel went on her little errand of charity all the same, and was rewarded by the glad smile of welcome which lit the poor woman’s face when she saw her visitor at the cottage door. After her visit was over, she hurried back, struggling happily against the driving rain, to complete that book which should be the perfect expression of her imaginative life and the most beautiful of all messages to Arthur Merivale—not an unmaidenly message, for she knew full well it would only be comprehensible to him if he was the man she dreamed of and if she was to him the woman of his dreams. Never had she found it so easy to write as on that wonder-

ful Saturday; never had she felt so keenly the thrill of delight that comes from the consciousness of good work done to the best of our ability as when she rose from her desk and, flourishing the wet sheet above her head, cried aloud in her solitude, "*Finis!*"

She sat down again glowing with happiness, flushed with the exhilarating charm of production, and turned over the pages of manuscript, reading again her favorite passages, living over again her most intimate scenes. Yes! she was sure it would do—she almost dared to hope it was good. It was so true for her, it must be true for him; and if for them, why not for all the world? Almost for the first time the joyful vision of a good review, a great success, a possible fame rose before her eyes, dazzling, incredible.

Something of the joy of that vision was still sparkling in her countenance when she joined her aunt at the luncheon table.

"What are you looking so excited about, child?" she was immediately asked.

"Do I look very excited?" Muriel asked, smiling.

"Yes, I hope you have not caught a fever in the village. It was so obstinate of you to go this morning. You know as well as I do that the village is full of fever. I have warned you so often. Villages always are."

" You need not be alarmed, dear," Muriel answered. " The fact is"—she could not retain her secret any longer—" the fact is I have been writing a book for a long, long time and to-day I have finished it at last. That 's why I have been scribbling so much all these days. That 's why I look so excited!"

" Writing a book!" echoed Aunt Dorcas, fairly startled out of her senses; " writing a book? Mercy on us! What are we coming to? Writing a book? What *do* you mean? You know I detest literary females! A book! And what sort of a book, pray?"

" A novel," replied Muriel.

" A novel!" cried the astonished spinster; " a novel! *How dare you?*"

For the first time in the history of their intercourse Muriel's self-restraint forsook her. She laughed aloud—but laughed that she might not cry. The fact was that Aunt Dorcas was both piqued and shocked. She was piqued because Muriel had not taken her into her confidence over the enterprise which she would have been the first to snub if she had been consulted. She was shocked because it seemed to her almost indelicate of a girl like Muriel to exhibit any rational interest in life, and also because she had been brought up to believe in the asbestos theory of young girls, to insist on the cold and passionless, ignorant innocence of maidens,

in whom, therefore, the mere conception of a novel must be actually improper. That Muriel should have written one whilst she lived under the same roof with her seemed little less than an outrage.

Before anything more could be said Muriel left the room, for she knew that both of them had reached the limits of their patience. She went up to her room and sat down before the bundle of completed manuscript. She set her elbows on the table and putting her head in her hands cried softly to herself. It *was* hard to be so lonely in the world. To-day of all days she had yearned for a little sympathy in her joy and her endeavors. That she had known she could not have, but she had hoped to avoid at any rate so jarring a scene as that which had just taken place.

Presently she arose and, without even wiping the tears from her cheeks or arraying the dishevelled curls on her forehead, she rolled up the manuscript and with loving, trembling hands prepared it for the post. Of publishers and business matters she knew nothing, but she had long kept by her an advertisement which she had cut out of the papers. It contained the address of an obliging firm of London publishers who expressed themselves as ready to consider the manuscript of young authors. To these gentlemen, whose behavior towards unknown writers promised to be so different from the haughty

condescension which she understood to be the characteristic of publishers in general, she consigned the book on which she had wrought with such patient, passionate devotion.

Almost by return of post she received an acknowledgment of her letter and parcel. A long and anxious period ensued in which she heard nothing more. At first she expected that every post would bring her a letter from the publishers accepting her work; then as the days slipped by she began to dread refusal as much more probable. The postman's knock filled her daily with fear, and each day when she returned from her walks or rides she dreaded the sight of her ill-fated bundle lying on the hall table—rejected. She had almost schooled herself to endure this fate, when, one day, about two months after she had sent the manuscript, a brief note arrived from the publishers. Their reader, they said, had carefully considered her book and informed them that in his opinion it was clever and well-written. He did not, however, advise them to undertake the whole risk of publishing it, as the book was not one which would appeal to a very wide public, especially as it was written by an unknown author. (What has that got to do with the merits of a book? Muriel commented impatiently, in her ignorance of the public.) They therefore proposed to publish the book for her on the following terms:

The author to advance £150 towards the cost of producing the book and to be entitled to half the profits on the first edition, and seventy-five per cent. of the profits on all future editions. As the firm in question did not intend the book to cost more than £130, production and advertisement included, this division of profit and loss no doubt appeared to them what is called a fair business arrangement.

Muriel was overwhelmed with delight at the prospect of seeing her book really in print, and her womanly instinct for a high percentage was dazzled by the prospect of that seventy-five per cent. of the profits on all future editions. "All future editions!" How grand and certain that sounded! And as for the £150, had she not that £200 in the savings-bank?—that amateur's nest-egg which those shrewdly calculating gentlemen had learned to bless. She therefore wrote off immediately accepting these proposals, and after some weeks the proof sheets began to arrive. We are all authors nowadays; we all write books, even the oldest of us; but who is so dulled or who so apathetic that he cannot remember the exquisite and bracing joy of his first proof sheets?

Muriel, who was endeavoring to reconcile Aunt Dorcas to the idea of her book by making it familiar to her, took her into her confidence on the matter one afternoon at tea.

"It is curious how much better it looks in print," she said, "and you cannot imagine how strangely important I feel when I see what I have thought recorded in type."

"The idea of *your* thoughts being printed!" returned Aunt Dorcas. "Really, Muriel, I have no patience with you. Your thoughts, indeed! Where have you got them all from?"

But as the work of revising her proof sheets went on the pleasure she had at first experienced in it evaporated, and the sense of her own importance to which she had referred disappeared. Instead, she experienced a haunting sense of doubt, a fear that the book had absolutely no merits, that it was stupid, trivial, and unintelligible. She saw, as her familiarity increased with it, how very short of her ideal it fell. She remembered so acutely her intentions, and there in crude, cold print stood her deplorable endeavors to fulfil them. Many a time in those latter days she was within an ace of writing to the publishers and asking them to let her revise her work, meaning to re-write it entirely. When at last the final sheets had been returned and sent to press, she realized, with regard to this book at any rate, however successful it might be, she could have no pleasure in it. She was too painfully aware of its imperfections; she realized with too poignant a certainty how inferior a copy it was of the pattern of

beauty, which, dimly conscious, feebly groping, she had so strenuously striven to reproduce. A sense of modesty, of shame almost, in her work took the place of that joyous pride which she had felt before she had fully gauged the extent of her failure. The conceit was gone out of her as out of every true artist. In its place came the humble, tenacious resolution to try again some day when she had strength and inspiration; once more to aspire, hoping, struggling, toiling, if haply she might attain.

When, therefore, the book came out she was calmly if sadly prepared for it to be condemned.

She was agreeably surprised when the first two notices of the press were distinctly favorable. She did not know that it was the settled policy of the two editors of these papers to have every book praised irrespective of its merits, within a few days of its first appearance. By this cunning device they secured a free advertisement of their papers in the publishers' " quotes."

Muriel was encouraged by these reviews to present a copy of the book to Aunt Dorcas, as soon as a parcel of presentation copies arrived from London. She knew well enough that her aunt would be piqued if she did not receive one and would snub her if she did. But armed with these two slips of printed praise she hoped to be able to disarm her

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criticism. She found Aunt Dorcas sitting in the drawing-room knitting, and rather nervously advanced towards her, holding a copy of her book in her hand.

"Aunt Dorcas," she said, shyly, "here is the novel for you. I thought you might like to have a copy."

Aunt Dorcas looked up for a moment and there was a slight flush on her cheek as if she were really pleased. Muriel saw this and was glad, although she knew her aunt well enough to be sure that she would rapidly master any inclination to be gracious. This was what happened. Aunt Dorcas quickly looked down again at her knitting and nodded, with a short, sharp jerk of her head, to the table at her side. Muriel laid the volume down there.

"Really, dear, it is very good of you," said her aunt at last. "I declare, the cover is very pretty in color. It will look very well on the drawing-room table."

"You will tell me what you think of it after you have read it, won't you?" Muriel continued bravely, swallowing the lump that would rise in her throat.

"Well, well," continued Aunt Dorcas, "I'm sure it is great rubbish and I don't know when I shall have time to read it. But thank you so much for giving it to me, darling—though I do wonder

how it is you can find time to waste in scribbling as you do. *I never have a moment to spare.* Still, perhaps, there is no great harm in it, after all,—though trashy novels I never did care for. Life, I always think, is so much more interesting. There! I 've dropped a stitch! A thing I never do. Dear, dear!"

Muriel clenched her hands and persevered.

"I 'm afraid it probably is great rubbish, as you say. But the reviews so far have been favorable."

"Reviews!" cried Aunt Dorcas. "So it has been well reviewed, has it? I am very glad. That was done by one of your friends, I suppose?"

"No."

"Ah!—Well, I expect you will find the publisher has got at the critics somehow, then. I believe there is a great deal of that sort of thing done."

Muriel turned round quickly and left the room.

Her cheeks were hot with anger and her big, soft, brown eyes were filled with tears. Her breast heaved rapidly with suppressed emotion.

"It is cruel, *cruel*," she exclaimed. "Why does she try to hurt me in every way she can?—And there is no one else! I wish I had never written the thing!"

She went to her room and began fingering the uncut copies of the book. To whom should she send them? Should she, above all, send one to

Arthur Merivale? She longed to do so, yet dared not. Suppose the book were really trash, as Aunt Dorcas assumed it necessarily must be, coming from her? At that moment a servant entered bringing her a letter. Muriel glanced at it and seeing that it was from her publishers opened it feverishly. Perhaps it was to say the book was selling well. She had heard that a good review will sell a book. Two such good notices as she had had—short though they were—might possibly, then, have accounted for an edition already. No! There was no word from the publishers. Only a newspaper cutting was enclosed. Muriel read it hastily; then again, more slowly; then again, whilst her nostrils twitched, her teeth pressed tightly on her under lip, and the veins on her forehead grew swollen.

"Why these maudlinings of a sentimental schoolgirl were ever written," wrote the reviewer, "it is hard to say; why having been written they were ever published, is a moot point, but why having been published they should be reviewed there is no reason at all, except for the opportunity it gives us of thanking the authoress for having written a short book and not a long one."

A burning sensation of shame and indignation rose within her, as she read these cruel words, loathing the attempted "smartness" of the journalist, protesting against the unfairness of a judgment so

severe and unexplained. Whoever could write a notice like that must be a cad, she muttered to herself. She longed to be a man to thrash him for it. As a matter of fact it was written by a woman who had quarrelled with the publishers and had never glanced at any part of the book except the title-page, the first page, and the last.

"I know it is not a great book, but I know, I *know* it is not so bad as all that," Muriel cried aloud. "Schoolgirl! Why, I 'm getting on for thirty!"

Then as she grew calmer she told herself that the critics who condemned were as likely to be right as those who commended her. But she gave up the idea of sending Arthur Merivale a copy of her "message," as she fondly regarded it. It would be too intolerable if he, so far from understanding the true meaning of it, were to regard it also as the "maunderings of a sentimental school-girl." No! He must get it for himself and understand it without a hint from her, just as she had found out his poems and interpreted them. As a matter of fact Arthur Merivale never heard of that novel, of which only half a dozen more colorless or contemptuous reviews appeared and two or three advertisements only were inserted in the papers. The fact was that Messrs. Blank & Blank were notorious among seasoned reviewers as publishers, on commission, of

any sort of trash for which young authors might be induced to pay the expenses and something more; they therefore hardly glanced at the books sent out by that firm and booksellers refused to risk the expense of stocking their publications. As to the advertisements—well, the less spent on advertisements the greater would be the difference between the cost of the book and the sum advanced by the author, a difference which naturally found its way into the pockets of Messrs. Blank & Blank. Given these disadvantages and the natural crudeness of a first work and Muriel's novel was doomed to failure. For her career as an author this was perhaps a good thing. Not that the book itself was worthless; a good critic, if that rare bird had happened to see it, would have marked the promising qualities in it—the imagination, the evident pains which had been taken with the writing and which greater pains and experience would teach the writer to conceal, the bright wit, the kindly humor, the sweet, sympathetic outlook upon life, the quick, intuitive perception of other people's feelings. All these qualities, so essential to a great novelist, were plain for those who had eyes to see.

Thus Muriel's first novel, that darling venture on which she had built such high hopes and lavished such care, fell flat from the press, to the publishers a profit, to the critics a derision, to Aunt Dorcas a

triumph, to Muriel an abiding shame and disappointment. Her "message," indeed, had grievously miscarried. The fact of its failure and the silence of Arthur Merivale led her to drop, to a great extent, those imaginative communings with him which had hitherto been her chief delight and source of inspiration. He still figured largely, was, in fact, still by far the most important and beloved personage of her day-dreams; but their relations were not so intimate as they had been. She now began to feel shy and not a little ashamed before him.

More than a year elapsed before she began to write again. Then suddenly, one bright spring day on which the larks in grand, invisible chorus were pouring forth their flood of grateful song at heaven's gates, the necessity of writing came upon her. Her genius was not of that inflated kind which prompts some writers to be so sceptical as to others' powers that they never believe a critic except when he praises, and yet so credulous as to their own gifts that they always blandly, blindly believe in themselves. She knew that Wordsworth's fashion of inferring merit in inverse proportion to public favor is apt to be somewhat dangerous. Her failure had pained her, but it stimulated her to greater effort. It had cleansed her of whatever little conceit she had ever had. She had meant never to write again till she was quite sure of herself.

She was far from being sure of herself now—but she seemed to have no choice, and the necessity of writing came upon her irresistibly. With chastened enthusiasm, but with mature judgment, she sat down to express the events and to describe the characters that had long been developing in her brain. She began to compose the novel with which, even after her many subsequent successes, the public rightly connects her name to-day. It is as the writer of *Sir Patrick Puddiephat's Daughter* that you always hear her described.

A curious incident, an incident, as she always steadfastly regarded it, of good omen, occurred the very night of the commencement of this new task. The excitement of writing had so stirred her brain that when she went to bed she could not at first sleep. At last, after she had lain awake for a long while, plotting and thinking, she fell into a heavy slumber. She was aroused, about an hour later, by an extraordinarily loud, clear calling of her name. She sat up in bed and cried out, “What is it?” Again her name sounded through the house, twice. And the voice was the voice of Arthur Merivale. So overwhelmingly strong was the illusion that, without doubting or reasoning, in obedience to so urgent a summons, thinking that she was in danger or he in distress, for there was a sound of pain as well as insistence in his voice, she sprang out of bed

and rushing to her bedroom door opened it and walked out into the passage.

Only when she had got thus far did her reason assert itself. It was quite impossible that he should be there—in their house—in the dead of night, calling her loudly by name, Muriel! Muriel! Half-laughing, half-shuddering, she went back to bed and quickly fell asleep again.

When she went down to breakfast next morning she found Aunt Dorcas standing in her favorite position before the fire: one foot, free of petticoat, resting on the fender, both hands holding the front sheet of *The Times* widespread before her. Through a pair of faintly tinted spectacles that balanced on the end of her long, thin nose, she was scanning the column which is known as the Hatch, Match, and Dispatch. She heaved a sigh as she finished it, experiencing that natural disappointment which attends one's failure to find a friend's name in the list. She was laying down the paper when a name she had missed caught her eye.

"Muriel, my dear," she said, "don't you know some people named Merivale—Cumberland people?"

Muriel started and flushed slightly.

"Yes," she said. "Why?"

"You will be sorry to hear that Mrs. Merivale is dead. At least, I think this must refer to the family you know."

She handed the paper to Muriel.

With a great effort Muriel steadied herself under the shock of this information. She disguised her emotion as she read the announcement in the paper of the death of Arthur's mother. Her warm heart was flooded with sympathy for him in his loss.

"I am very, very sorry," she said. "Mr. Merivale used to be a college chum of Ted's and a great friend of mine. I think I will write to tell him how sorry we are to hear of his mother's death. It will be terrible for him—he has devoted his whole life to her. She was a great invalid, I believe."

She could eat but little breakfast this morning for thinking of that solitary mourner in Cumberland. The recollection of that curious illusion of his calling to her in the night made her seem very close to him, and she felt his loss almost more than her own. There was not a touch of selfishness or self-consciousness in the sincere and simple sympathy with which she was filled.

She seemed to know, with that cry of his still ringing in her ears, that it would soothe his pain to hear from her. A letter, accordingly, she wrote to him, in her untainted sincerity, without a moment's shadow of reflection as to any possible influence it might have on him or her, without any motive beyond the immediate, womanly desire to comfort in the only way possible the man she loved. Very

touchingly, very unaffectedly, very beautifully she wrote to him of her sorrow for the blow which had befallen him,—wrote to him once again after the lapse of ten years that letter which might well have changed the course of their two lives, but which, as we have seen, was destined to be blown into the stormy waters of the lake, unnoticed, unacknowledged, untraced.





CHAPTER V

THE CAREER OF MERIVALE

WITHIN a week of taking his resolution to travel, Arthur Merivale started for his ramble on the Continent. It was five years before he returned. When he was asked in after years what he was doing in those *Wanderjahre*, he used to say, with a vague wave of the hand: "I was learning things." What exactly he learned he did not explain. His friends were, meanwhile, not left without certain indications of him. He opened and maintained a spasmodic correspondence with the six or eight college friends who were beginning by this time to emerge from their generation and to make their mark in the world. Time is a deft but cruel sorter: merciless but impartial he wields his winnowing fan, and in the short interval of a dozen years the chaff is separated from the wheat and the wheat begins to command its price. The surest index to the worth of Merivale lay in the fact that at Oxford, among a very numerous and varied acquaint-

ance, he had unconsciously formed the centre of an inner circle of intimate friends who represented the highest type of energy and intelligence amid the undergraduates of his day. They were not all of them the best-known men in the university, nor even the most successful in the schools, but they were the ablest. Six or eight of them, by this time, were beginning to arrive. In politics, in literature, at the Bar, their names were beginning to be heard. These men, when they met often, asked each other: "What 's become of Merivale?" They had dropped or forgotten the greater part of their useless or unsuccessful acquaintances of old days; in the crowded hours of their struggle there was not time, they would have told you, for everybody. But Merivale remained in their memories and in their affections, a puzzle and a disappointment. And in spite of his disappearance, his "burial," as they termed it, in the country, a grave from which all these years there had come no voice, his ghost still haunted them and they still believed that some day he would return to be a leader among men. When, therefore, without warning or excuse, first one then another of them received letters from him, dated from this capital or that, they began to discuss eagerly among themselves the meaning of these apparitions. One thing was certain: the letters were brilliant. Exquisite essays in observation,

they were at first a little lacking in depth, but they grew increasingly full of energy and knowledge. A daring grasp of affairs, a bold application of the political theories which he was known to hold, and a brilliant handling of facts distinguished his comments on the social conditions of the countries through which he passed. Of himself, he wrote very little, nor did he explain his object or his occupation. But he was heard of in the north of Spain, mentioned casually by an attaché as having "turned up" at the Embassy in Paris, again at Rome, and again at Constantinople; reported to have been seen, apparently a resident, in the Austrian Tyrol, and known to have been lying low for a considerable time in Lombardy.

Presently in the weightier monthly magazines there appeared occasional signed articles by him.

They were distinguished not only by their apparent brilliancy, but, as after events in some cases quickly proved, by that prudent foresight which is the mark of the statesman as opposed to the mere journalist or politician. The first article which brought him prominently before the thinking public was a striking refutation of a flash-in-the-pan alarm of a Carlist rising. There was no rising and the writer who had raised the alarm soon turned his attention to the promotion of a Russian scare. But the masterly manner in which Merivale dealt with

the history of the Basque provinces and their present discontents, the personal knowledge and penetration, and the dialectic which he showed in proving his point, were noted and remembered. The same penetration and persuasiveness, the same personal knowledge and applied study of history, were displayed soon afterwards in his examination of the Referendum system of Switzerland at a time when some such political nostrum was being advocated for England. The same qualities, again, distinguished his remarkable forecast of a great Socialist outbreak in Italy, and in his optimistic prophecy, not at that time properly appreciated, with regard to the attitude likely to be adopted by the British Colonies in the event of a war in which the principles of Empire were involved. The cumulative effect of these and other articles, controversial or reflective, was very considerable, and most of all in those quarters in which Merivale aimed at making an impression. There was, indeed, a risk of his acquiring the unenviable reputation of omniscience.

"I would rather be thought omniscient than be omni-ignorant," he wrote back to one of his friends in London at this time, in reply to a letter which hinted at his danger and advised him either to come back at once and enter into effective political life or else to specialize studiously.

"I have been working hard in the intervals of a

luxurious idleness and have written only of things which I have taken great pains to get to know. But I believe you are right and thank you for your advice. I will even follow it. I am coming back and intend to stand for Parliament. The reason, partly, is that I am getting tired of my life out here. I have had an ideal time of it on the Continent—but there is no wine without the dregs of disgust. So I am coming home soon and you shall see me (and help me, I know, old friend) toe the line and start for the race in good earnest."

The letter was written to Radlet, the well-known Q. C. and M. P., who already by that time had laid the foundation of his brilliant career at the Parliamentary Bar. He showed the letter the same day to Reggie Monckton, whom he found taking his tea in their club. Monckton was one of those men who are physically deceptive. His fine figure, his clear, fresh complexion, and his apparently perfect health would have earned him the reputation of an athlete if he had chosen to claim it. As it was, he boasted that he took no exercise and vowed that he knew no game—except when cooked. He was an extremely clever man, who devoted his wits, for which his work as a clerk at the War Office gave him at present no scope, to the development of his natural taste for cynical gossip.

" In the service of my country and for the con-

sideration of a miserably inadequate pittance, I add up figures and check accounts all day, and who shall grudge me a little conversation in the evening ? ” Such was his defence.

“ My work is of the kind that would make the brains of a fish rust, and I am not a fish. I am a rather intelligent man. As I cannot sharpen my wits on my work, I must sharpen them on my friends. The instinct of self-preservation obliges me to talk scandal.”

Perhaps if he had analyzed the matter a little further he would have recognized the fact that there is an unpleasing mixture of intellectual conceit, of envy, malice, and snobbishness in the composition of a scandal-monger which is not worth developing. But then, if he had sacrificed his talent, though he might have been a safer friend, he would have been a deplorably less amusing companion.

“ No wine without the dregs of disgust,” he quoted when he had read the letter. “ What wine has he been taking, I wonder ? Perhaps there is some truth in what Freddie Bington said about that ménage of his in the Tyrol. Wine and wom—. What ’s the saying ? ”

“ I don’t believe a word of it,” said Radlet.

“ I cannot make it out,” answered the other; “ I believe there must be something of the kind going on. Otherwise what could have kept him abroad

all these years ? There were rumors, you know—at Paris."

" What a chap you are for gossip ! " said Radlet. Then he asked : " What rumors ? "

" Oh, nothing. Only last summer when Liane d' Arbois was making such a hit with that new dance of hers at La Scala and everybody was raving about her and nobody could get near her—*c'est une femme entretenue, vous savez*—it was said that a young Englishman, not very well off, was responsible for her,—her protector, in fact. I believe she is a Suisse or a Tyrolese, by the bye,—well, it was also said that *monsieur le patron* objected very strongly to her appearing in public, but that she insisted on doing so in order to add to their income. Quite a Manon Lescaut affair. She wanted to cut more of a dash, I suppose, and that 's very natural too. Luxury and admiration are the only things women in her position have to live for. But it sounded to me at the time as if she and her young English friend would soon part company."

Reggie Monckton stretched out his legs and yawned. Then he added:

" So Merivale has drunk his wine to the dregs, has he ? Well, it 's about time he came home. He 'll make his mark if he is careful. By the bye, I heard he was in Paris"—he paused, then added—" last summer."

"*Damnation!*" exclaimed Radlet, "I don't believe a word of it."

He frowned, rose from his seat, walked moodily up and down the hearth-rug in front of Monckton, who raised his eyebrows and asked, "Believe what?" with an air of astonished innocence. Radlet sat down again in his long leathern chair and smiled moodily in silence. He did not like to think this thing of his friend, and yet the more he thought of it the more probable it seemed. Merivale's long stay abroad and the influence which had inspired his work and his unexpected determination to come home—all these things had required some explanation.

Monckton's theory seemed to supply it only too conclusively.

What had kept him abroad all these years? A woman. Who had stimulated him, after those years of silent vegetation in Cumberland, to work and write with such ambitious energy? A woman. Why was he coming home now? Because he was tired of a woman. Oh! the eternal feminine! Is there no secret of men's hearts that people like Monckton do not think they can answer thus?

At the same time Radlet remembered that there are still many people in England who think that an Englishman, if he voluntarily spends much of his time on the Continent, must be either half insane or wholly immoral—or possibly both.

The Continental, they argue, is rarely continent. The world has always been vicious and always thought itself more vicious than it is. We naturally like to think that other people are going to the devil, especially if they are across the Channel. It was inevitable, Radlet argued in defence of his friend, that Merivale, who was an enigma anyhow, should come in for his share of the gossip which is founded on such feelings. Therefore, as he told Monckton, he refused to believe a word of this scandal till he had some proof of it.

But he believed it all the same. And Monckton knew that he believed it. And he knew that Monckton knew that he believed it,—which is the triumph of the gossip.

Whatever the cause or influence may have been, it was quite evident, when he did return, that Merivale in some mysterious way had regained all the vigor of his early youth, and added to it the maturity, strength of will, and fixity of purpose of manhood. The man who had crept out of England five years before, melancholy and inert, marked with disappointment in every detail of his appearance, returned strong and determined, full of hope and energy and knowledge. He had discarded the slovenly habit of dress into which he had fallen. The eccentricities of gait and manner had vanished. He was groomed now with that scrupulous care

which is in certain men noticeable without being foppish. They are usually men in whom some woman takes an interest. It was remarked that his hair had turned iron-gray, but this only added to the impression of strength which the clear, square brow and the muscular under-jaw produced upon even the most unobservant observer. The most remarkable feature in his handsome face had always been his over-mobile upper lip, but in these past few years the lines about the mouth had grown firmer and the under-lip had grown more tense. The nostrils had grown thinner, more delicate, more refined; they had not thickened as is usually the case with men as they grow older and more self-indulgent. The general result of these changes was to intensify the look of strenuous will, guarded by a piercing intelligence, which characterized him.

"Merivale may have thought himself a poet once," observed Monckton, "but there is jolly little of the dreamer left in him now."

The remark was justified by appearances and by Merivale's vehemence of action. But what Monckton had left out of account was the development of his really wonderful organ. The voice which had thrilled Muriel Bowness and which still, after all these years, echoed so clearly in her memory, had always been one of peculiar charm and rare quality. What was it that had taught Merivale how to use

it? What had produced the development of it which was now so noticeable? A perfect command of its inflections, added to the rich, haunting vibrations of his utterances, gave a magnetic power to his personality which, as Radlet observed, was positively frightening. It was the voice of an orator who is capable of rising to the heights of poetic fancy; it was the large and smooth, deep-strung voice which can sway crowds and is worth a hundred arguments in a speaker's armory. You could not talk to Merivale for five minutes without becoming aware that this voice, so skilfully used to attack or to disarm, to deprecate or to persuade, was informing his personality irresistibly upon yours, was winning you to him even perhaps against your own judgment.

"Yes," Monckton admitted, when Radlet spoke of it, as they sat in their club, drinking a sherry and bitters before dinner and waiting for Merivale, who was to dine with them. "But a man does not learn to use his voice like that by living a hermit life on the Continent. *Cherchez la femme*, I tell you. His voice bewrayeth him. Any one can see he has had a very elaborate education in the arts of persuasion and the trick of fascination."

"You're incorrigible!" said Radlet.

"Because I am correct," Monckton retorted.

Radlet was silent for a space and drummed his

fingers meditatively on the top of his prematurely bald head. It was a characteristic gesture on a characteristic head. There are bald heads and bald heads, as, for that matter, there are gray-beards and gray-beards also. For there are shiny pates and ones more transparent; luminous, almost, some are, and soft in consistency. There are heads that seem to have been scrubbed bald by an excessive use of soap and water and others that seem simply in the course of nature to be so. Some men have stubble on top surrounded by a fringe of thin locks that resemble a worn-out door-mat or a decayed clothes-brush; others again have crowns so smooth that you long to stroke them, regardless of their owner's dignity, when they happen to be seated in front of you at a lecture or a concert; and yet again there are crowns so pimply and eruptive that all interest in their possessors is drowned in the absorbing speculation as to whether they can really be like that all over. In shape, too, these bare pates vary with the characters of their men; for there are broad crowns and conical; plains dotted with diminutive kopjes and mountainous districts divided up by hogsbacks and sweeping ridges and valleys. Maps of Africa you will see, and of the United States, peaks of Darien and deserts of Sahara. Radlet's bald head was cone-shaped and luminous, of the innocent intellectual type, and it harmonized

very beautifully with his smooth oval face and his strenuous, clear-cut features.

"I am quite sure of one thing," he remarked presently, "and that is, that with his powers of work, his knowledge, and his voice, Merivale will twist the House of Commons round his fingers when he gets there."

"Is he going to get there?" asked Monckton.

"Yes, he has been talking to me about it to-day, and I have sent him off to interview . . . and the other party bosses. Yes, he is certainly going to get there. The funny thing is that he prefers to be a carpet-bagger and not to stand for his own constituency in Cumberland. But perhaps that is because the seat is safe for the Radicals there, and also he wants a bye-election if possible. He does not want to wait. Besides, he says his place is let and he has no influence there at all. I daresay he is right. I rather fancy Merivale will generally prove to be right."

"Well, I wish he 'd prove punctual," said Monckton, "I 'm hungry."

"By the bye," Radlet said, offering his impatient friend a cigarette, "we 've got to wait for Ted Bowness too. I came across him in Pall Mall this afternoon and thought he would like to meet Merivale again."

"Good," said Monckton, "I wonder what *he*'s doing in town."

Radlet had the reputation of being a very acute judge of men, and it was no mean compliment to Merivale that the impression he had made on his old friend was so completely in his favor. He was at present very busily following Radlet's advice and using his introductions. In the course of his peregrinations to the political clubs and the offices of party organization in search of men whose word is as law unto the meek constituencies, he was greatly surprised, and of course agreeably pleased, to find his name not unknown to them. With the wise modesty of a man of the world, he had come home expecting to find himself forgotten or unheard of. At the same time, knowing that the words of the Psalmist are true, "So long as thou doest well unto thyself men shall speak well of thee," he was prepared not to hide his light under a bushel. But he was agreeably surprised to find that he had no need of advertising himself. These wise men of the political agencies and clubs knew something of him already and showed clearly that they were inclined to set a high value on his abilities and to welcome the offer of his services.

"Sure, I don't know," answered Radlet, in reply to Monckton's wonderment.

"The case of Teddy Bowness fills me with

sorrow," Monckton observed, comfortably reclining in the deep leather-cushioned lounge and blowing his cigarette smoke to the ceiling.

"Why, in the world?" asked Radlet in astonishment; "he is the least depressing man I know and one of the most enviable."

"He is running absolutely to waste."

"Waist? Yes, he is getting a bit stout—but he's not running to waste any other way that I know of. I should have said that he is having as good a time and leading as sound a life as most——"

"He is running to waste, I repeat, in spite of your vile pun. He used to be a bright, intelligent man who seemed to have a future. Now—well, he hunts foxes and has not even a past."

"Well, I must say, I think you might do worse than live an honest, healthy, open-air life like his."

"What's the good of it?"

"For one thing, I should say, when the time comes, our fox-hunters and our yeomen will prove surprisingly good material for the defence of their country. Meantime, they add to our stock of energy and their younger sons——"

"Ah, yes," Monckton broke in, "I suppose we shall live to see the day when the hunters of foxes become hunters of men; when they raise the 'Tally-ho!' in Berlin or cry 'Gone away!' or 'Yoicks!' in the streets of Paris. The invasion of the Goths and

Huns, or whoever they were, will be nothing to it! For all that Teddy Bowness is running to waste. He has married a wife who is as dull—duller than ditch-water, and who is as content to live eternally among their turnips as he is. Meanwhile, he allows his sister, who used to be a very pretty and charming girl, and, for a woman, quite intelligent, and who is also an heiress now, whatever else she has become,—he allows his sister, I say, to live in a cottage on his estate, where she mopes, at least I suppose she mopes. Anyway, she writes novels that go into the sixth edition. I call them positively pathetic,—Ted and his sister, I mean,—not her novels. I have no doubt they are bad, though I don't read novels, personally. I have enough of Bradshaw and the arithmetic tables at the War Office to cure any appetite for light reading I otherwise might have."

"Muriel Bowness is a thundering good writer," Radlet replied, "but I see where the shoe pinches. It's their living in the country you don't like. Of course we all know you have n't been out of London for six years——"

"Eight," said Monckton.

"Beg pardon, eight. But the country is n't really so demoralizing as you seem to think. You should have a look at it. London is n't *quite* everywhere."

" Exactly. That's why I stay in London. But you must remember I do sometimes go to Paris,—by the night boat, of course."

Radlet laughed. His friend's pose as a decadent was always amusing, which was probably why the decadent posed.

" How do you use up your leave, I wonder?" he asked.

" I change my valet," replied Monckton, with a wave of his hand; " that's holiday enough for me."

He was quite well aware that everybody knew he had no valet.

" And then the clubs manage a change of scene for me. It is extremely interesting, in August and September, to investigate the cuisine, explore the cellars, and examine the members of the clubs with which one's own club 'exchanges hospitality,' as they call it. Besides, if one wants to go abroad, one can always read guide-books or go to the theatre instead. When you have done that, you know so much about the places you thought of going to that it would be intolerably flat and stale to go. That's the way to get rid of this morbid love of travelling, which induces our good countrymen to disfigure the Continent. You also avoid mosquitoes and Anglomania, by my system. Travelled people, I have noticed, are apt to appreciate England to an uncomfortable degree.

At this moment a waiter appeared with the latest editions of some evening papers, and the charm of speculation yielded promptly to the interest of facts. The two friends were presently interrupted in their perusal of the papers by the arrival of Ted Bowness, Muriel's excellent brother, cheery, bustling, and rotund, a plump and pleasing person and an admirable master of hounds.

"Good evening, Radlet," he exclaimed; "'fraid I'm a bit late. Been rushed off my legs to-day. Where's Merivale? Not turned up yet? Hallo, Monckton! It's a long time since we met. How are you?"

"All right, thanks," said Monckton; "you don't look such a beastly invalid either! What are you in town for? Business?"

"Yes. Confound it! Business—at least, sort of—"

"Oh, I know that sort of business. Theatrical business, you mean?"

"No. Hang it!" He stopped, pulled at his fair mustache, and made a pretence of looking important. "Politics!"

They all laughed.

"Teddie's turned politician! Splendid!" cried Monckton. "I think you'd better invite me to hunt your hounds for you when your legislative duties—Ahem!"

At that moment Merivale was shown into the room by a diminutive lad in buttons.

"I did n't know I was to be present at a Cabinet meeting," Monckton remarked. "Radlet really ought n't to spring these things on me!"

Merivale shook hands with his host and Monckton; then he looked, hesitatingly, enquiringly, at the hale and hearty little man at his side, as if he were waiting to be introduced.

"Why, damn it, man," cried Bowness, "don't you know me?"

"Ted Bowness!" exclaimed Merivale. "Ted Bowness, by all that's delightful! But you were the last man I was expecting to see. I was so surprised that I really was n't sure."

"Ah! I suppose I have altered a bit too," returned Bowness. "Let me see. It must be well over ten years since we last met. You never would come and stay with us after——" He broke off and added: "I am afraid a lot of things, good and bad, have happened since then."

A curiously embarrassed and troubled look had spread over Merivale's countenance. He had picked up a wooden match from the box on the table beside him and was nervously breaking it into small pieces. Ted saw that he was, as he would have expressed it, "putting his foot in it," somehow. He stopped, frowned for a second, wondering how,

then remembering it was the death of Merivale's father that had ended the visit referred to, he blundered on:

"I shall never forget that cricket match. Ha! Ha!"

His hearty laugh was the signal of his good intentions. Turning to Radlet, he proceeded to recount the story, intending to recall to Merivale only the humorous side of the day. It was clumsily done, but then, as Monckton observed, you don't expect diplomacy from a man like Bowness. But though they all saw Merivale wince at first, and though both Radlet and Monckton knew that he was wincing throughout the whole length of Bowness's well-meant endeavor to put things right with his interminable reminiscence, none of them knew exactly where he was galled.

It had, in fact, been a severe shock to Merivale to see Bowness at all. His immediate reference to the old days, above all to that day of all days, gave him no time to recover himself, no respite from the realization that the memory of the past was not so painless as he had thought. It is difficult—oh, so strangely difficult, to lay the ghost of a dead romance!

Merivale had been confident that his life on the Continent and his work had entirely healed his wound. And yet, so soon after his return, this

casual thrust of circumstances seemed to be reopening it. Deep down in his heart he felt it beginning to bleed afresh. He stood still, plainly, silently suffering, and, as he listened to Bowness's clumsy tale, Radlet noticed a strange, dreary, far-away look in his eyes. Then he observed him clench his hands and set his lips; whilst his eye brightened. It would not do, he had told himself. This sort of thing could not be allowed. The past was past. There was no room in his life for love or marriage now. "I have no time, no money, no freedom. Besides, it is nothing. Probably the atmosphere of dear old Ted is not good for my wound."

He smiled cynically and was himself again by the time the story was told. But Radlet, who had watched him, remembered and wondered. "It was not his father's death that he was thinking of, whatever else it was," was his deduction. Beyond that he did not penetrate.

"Well, shall we go in to dinner?" he said, as soon as Bowness had finished and all had laughed sufficiently.

"How do you like being back?" asked Bowness of Merivale as soon as they were all seated.

"Ah! it is wonderful. I am simply thrilling with the pleasure and excitement of it," Merivale replied. "You don't know—nobody can imagine who has not been abroad for a long spell—how in-

tensely delightful and exhilarating it is to get back to London—even though you are not a Londoner. There is a breadth, a vigor, a subdued sense of greatness in it which imparts imperceptibly an air of freshness to this great Babylon that is ours."

His long, thin fingers played meditatively with the stem of his wine glass. He spoke in low tones, slowly at first and then as his subject seemed to carry him away the words came more quickly, and more quickly, but his tongue never tripped and the intoxication of his own phrases was never so great as to prevent him from using to the utmost advantage the rich, soft notes of his deep voice.

"Yes, there is a stir of life," he continued, "a mixing of humanity, a circulation of ideas in this great temple of common-sense. The song of London is the burthen of empire: through the roar and the rumbling of its increasing traffic you can hear the reverberations of the world; in the vast volume of its mighty chorus the voices of all mankind, of every age and of every clime, are joined. It is the heart to which, through innumerable arteries, the blood of the world's commerce runs.

"London! Ah, London! It is the meeting-place of mankind; it extracts for you the quintessence of existence! After all, it is only in London that you can get to know the world; only in our little parish of St. James that you can hear the gossip of the

four corners of the earth. Monte Carlo is, for a season, more cosmopolitan; but there is no sense of unity there—except the sense of greed. Vienna—Rome—Constantinople—they all have their moments, but they are not of all time in my sense of the phrase, and they are not the spectators of all existence——”

“ What about Paris ? ” said Monckton suddenly, and scrutinized him carefully to see the effect of his question. But if there was any change in Merivale’s manner, it was scarcely perceptible. He certainly did not flinch, but the lines of his face hardened ever so little.

“ He has got nerve, anyway,” Monckton confessed.

“ Paris ? ” Merivale echoed, turning towards his questioner; “oh, Paris of course proves terribly fascinating to the Americans and French; she is a sorceress, a cruel sorceress, the Circe of the Déracinés—but it is the most insular of all the capitals. Besides, there is no court—no centre to it. No, it is only here, in London, that men are continually turning up from the uttermost parts of the earth,—men who have governed cannibals or commanded armies; men who have invented countries, discovered gold mines, or financed empires; men who know the secrets of all the courts and who influence the policy of kings; men who have founded colonies or

refused crowns; men who have done and suffered everything, traded and travelled in every way and in every part. They all come here, sooner or later they all come; and the remarkable thing is that whilst they are here they conform to the great unwritten laws of London. Of course, they do not stay—London is a good place to get away from, but the only place to be—but whilst they are here they conform. Men who have lived for months naked among savages in some sweet, distant island of the South; men who have successfully deceived the roving tribes of Morocco into hailing them as one of their own kind—pirates, explorers, governors, financiers, they all with one consent buy them high hats and frock coats, they look, for the time being, quiet, bored, respectable Englishmen like the rest of us, and they obey without a murmur, like the children of the Great Mother City that they are, the upraised finger of a policeman."

"It 's too big, I think," said Bowness, having finished his soup.

"Yes, London is a huge city, a vast metropolis—but it is in scale. It is a worthy mother of the empire, for it is the world in little. Here are all the treasures of art and science, of learning and of nature, at your disposal; all the happiness and poverty, all the wealth and misery of life side by side. "All the weal of the world, and the woe too," as

Langland has it. "What need of an Imperial Institute in South Kensington, when every yard of London is a sign and token of the greatness of the British Empire, such as it is? You may go to the docks and in the turbaned, cotton-clad lascar you will see that India is yours; walk westwards and you may pass through miles of streets where only the Yiddish tongue falls on your ears, witness of the great Jewish races which Russia and the other countries in their folly have thrust upon us; pass through Westminster and go down Whitehall and on your right is the palace where Charles, that royal martyr, was sacrificed on the altar of public liberty, on your left, but you will not notice it, is that Downing Street which is the heart of our political world. Behind you is the Abbey and the streets behind the Abbey, the London of a cathedral town."

"It is Westminster," said Monckton.

"Yes, but where is your Parisian Westminster? I said also that London was of all time, and Paris is certainly only of the last thirty years; and as to Westminster, well—go into the City, you have the old inns—St. Bartholomew's and—"

"You may find the Lord Mayor," said Monckton.

"Pass through Leicester Square, and France, you find, is at your side. Dine at a restaurant and Ger-

many waits on you. Sitting next to you, tamed, tanned, and sober, at his solitary table at the window overlooking the park is the mighty hunter, or the hero of a siege, the pioneer of empire, bored, typical, and apparently dull; or Robinson, the colonial statesman, brown, bearded, powerful, and downright, more nobly, wisely British than the English; or Smith, the inventor of some astounding machine, or Jones, the owner of hotels which make the Continent habitable. Yes, London is, indeed, the world in little."

He paused and smiled. The delicious savor of his own words, the gratifying sense of satisfaction with the way in which he had worked out the casual idea of the moment, were as incense to him.

"How long have you been in town?" asked Monckton, mentally commenting that Merivale had the "gift of the gab, all right." Monckton was accustomed to do all the talking himself and therefore disapproved of other people's monologues.

"About a couple of weeks," answered Merivale, "that's all, I must confess. But it is enough to form an impression, and I have often found that one's first impression is apt to be the truest and certainly the most lasting. The eye of the resident is blinded by detail and his perceptions grow blunt with familiarity."

"Well, I must say, I never thought of London

in that light before," Bowness put in. He had been carried away by the rhapsody to which they had been listening and had found himself strangely stirred by the melody of Merivale's voice and the rhythm of his words. As he considered emotion to be bad form,—that wide peculiar category which is the negative dispensation of the English gentleman,—and as he also regarded eloquence as only suitable for what he would have called a "frothy socialist," or occasionally for a post-prandial peer, he was momentarily rather annoyed both with Merivale and with himself. Therefore he firmly asserted his independent judgment.

" Of course I am not clever enough to feel all that sort of —er—rot, and I find London an awful bore after about a couple of days."

" That was what I said," said Merivale.

Radlet laughed.

" Then why are you here now ? " asked Monckton, who was always eager to obtain information with regard to other people's affairs in order that he might be able to misinterpret it. " You said something about politics being the reason, before dinner, but——"

" Yes," returned Bowness, candidly, " it does sound odd, does n't it, but politics *is* the reason of my presence in what Merivale calls ' this Babylon of ours.' "

" Why ? Are you thinking of standing for Parliament ? " Merivale demanded in surprise.

" I ? No, thanks. At least not if I can help it. Not till they arrange the sessions with due regard for the huntin' season. But the fact is that they are trying to run a candidate for the next election in our part of the country,—when old Sir James retires, I mean, which will be quite soon; that 's a secret, but you won't let it go any farther. Well, the long and short of it is that the chap they 're trying to force on us simply won't do. I won't go into details. I daresay he 's rich and has deserved well of the party; and they say he is clever and so on. All we know is, he won't do. His opinions are not our opinions, and his ways are not our ways. I expect there are lots of other constituencies he 'll just suit—but ours is a very sound, old-fashioned part of the world and we know a bounder when we see one. And a gentleman, too, by gad ! Take the case of old Sir James. His only important performance as a public man was his failure to deliver a speech on the occasion of the Queen's Jubilee in '87. His appearances as an orator began and ended with that abortive attempt. He 's never strung half a dozen sentences together since. But the constituency knows him and nobody has ever dared to contest his seat. There are lots of chaps about who are richer and worse-mannered, with

cleverer tongues and worse hearts, but they know better than to stand up to a man like Sir James. The English voter may be as stupid as the Americans think a lord, but they have the vast advantage, as electors, of knowing an honest English gentleman when they see one. And a bounder, too, by George! Well, this fellow has managed to put everybody's back up who 's worth anything and he 's altogether a square peg in a round hole. Thinks he can impress the county with his beastly side and cash and can buy the constituency without asking anybody's leave. I believe myself he 's a damned radical in disguise. Just the sort of man to turn round after he 's elected and say his conscience tells him his county must be in the wrong. We want a man who will say: ' My county, right or wrong! and for God's sake shut up!' Well, you see how we feel about it. It makes me hot and savage to think of the fellow. He has n't an H in his constitution and—and I 'd swear he has never been outside a horse in his life! ''

The tone of intense indignation with which Ted expressed this culminating fault of the unlucky candidate was irresistibly comic. A shout of laughter greeted the climax of the orator, who laughed too, but without quite understanding why.

" By Jove, Bowness," said Monckton, " you are quite an orator."

"Rot!" returned Bowness, not altogether displeased at the compliment to his outburst. "But I know what I think and I can say what I think," he went on, "and, by gad, I said it pretty strong, too, to some of those chaps to-day."

"What was the result?" asked Radlet, with an air of great interest.

"Well, you see, they have to listen to me because our family has always had great influence in our part of the world, and, as you know, my poor father was Member for over twenty years. Besides, I showed them pretty clearly that I was speaking for others besides myself, and that they will lose the seat if they choose to let it come to that. We're not going to be represented by a man like that. You cannot imagine what a prig and bounder the fellow is. First time I saw him after he had taken the Towers (place near ours) he told me he was proud to meet 'one who had the privilege of being the brother of the most talented of our female writers' —darn his impudence! And then he proceeded to ask me if I thought the foxes really liked being 'pursued by the dogs'! I told him that I thought that they liked it as well as being pursued by the bitches. And he looked at me as though he thought I was a madman. '*Pursued by dogs*,' indeed! '*Privilege*'! '*Female writer*'! It makes me sick!"

The friends laughed again at his vehemence. Merivale was racking his brains to discover the meaning of that allusion to Ted Bowness's sister. Was the point, he wondered, that the unctuous candidate had confused Bowness with some one else, or was it possible that—? He was about to ask for an explanation, when Radlet, smiling still, but with the keen insistence of a cross-examining counsel who is leading up to an important admission from a witness, broke in with :

“But what was the result of your interview ? ”

“ Oh ! They asked me if I was willing to stand myself,” returned Bowness after he had emptied his glass of champagne, “ provided that their forsaken fool could be induced to withdraw.”

“ And will you ? ” Radlet inquired.

“ H'm, that 's the question. I had been asked to stand some years ago, you know, but of course I refused. What have I done to deserve such a fate ? I feel like my poor father when they offered to knight him. ‘ Is thy servant a dog ? ’ he said.”

“ Or a hound,” Monckton murmured.

“ What does it mean to me, if you come to think of it ? Have to sit stewing in London half the year, fugging and frousting in the House day and night, when I want to be huntin' or shootin'; have to double all my old subscriptions, which are heavy enough already, and subscribe to a hundred new

societies for every sort of folly; spend half my life in the worst club in London, eternally dividing,—like some bally kind of insect; distribute more prizes than I do already to undeserving children for self-advertising schoolmasters; have to keep a private secretary to write a civil answer to every confounded fool who chooses to call himself an elector; all for the sake of being bored to death and then abused in the papers. I know too much about it, and it is n't good enough."

"Splendid!" cried Monckton.

"You see your prospect," said Radlet to Merivale.

"Well, I told them I would think about it, and really, if it comes to that, I *will* stand, rather than let that bounder have a show. But what I want, and we all want down there, is some real sound man to come forward whom we can all support, a man, I mean, who would do us credit and—let us alone."

"I can put you on to the ideal candidate," said Radlet, with a smile of triumph. "Gentlemen, I beg to propose our friend Mr. Merivale!"

"Merivale!" echoed Bowness, in astonishment; "why, you don't mean to say you are going in for this sort of thing?"

"I plead guilty," Merivale said, smiling; "I throw myself on the mercy of the court. But——"

"Oh! then, of course, you are just the man."

"But—" Merivale began again and then hesitated. Bewildered by the turn of events, not sure whether to be altogether delighted in their course, for a vague instinct of dread warned him to refrain,—not for political reasons—he tried to hang back, to gain time to consider. But his friends overruled him.

"You have n't committed yourself yet for any constituency, have you?" Radlet inquired.

"No, I can't say I have. They've been very nice to me. I have promised to speak anywhere and any time they call upon me. But I am afraid they want me to begin by fighting some hopeless seat, leading some forlorn hope at the general election, for which I really have n't the time, the money, or the inclination. This would be a great chance, a splendid opportunity, I see that. So soon—a bye-election—Ted's influence—not an expensive constituency. Oh, it's altogether a plum! It's too good to be true."

"Not a bit," said Bowness. "Then it's settled. You hunt, of course?"

"Well—I used—a little—I *was* very fond—But I have been abroad so long, you know."

Bowness's face fell a little, but another glance at Merivale's determined features and clear eye reassured him.

"Oh, that's all right," he said, cheerfully,

" you 'll soon get into it again. *You* don't look as if you had lost your nerve. And I can mount you very conveniently. There 's Jimmy and The Tzar and Who 's Who. They 'll all carry you beautifully—and by Jove they 'll carry the seat for you if you can seat them! "

" That 's too good of you," said Merivale.

" Not at all. It would really suit my book very well. You don't ride over eleven stone four, I bet. You *can* ride, of course—once a horseman always a horseman. And there 's no place for canvassing like the hunting-field, in our country! You must come round with me to-night to my aunt's reception—Lady Solightly, you know. Sure to be a lot of political people there. We 'll begin at once, and there 's no doubt where you 'll end. I drink to the health of the Right Honorable Arthur Merivale, M. P. Here 's luck! "

And so with a laugh and a light-hearted wish and a glass of champagne, the fate of Arthur Merivale was settled by those good friends of his.

" You 'll come and stay with me," said Bowness presently. He was delighted with the new way out of all his difficulties which he honestly imagined *he* had found, for it never struck him that Radlet had a finger in his pie and had done the manœuvring. " And nurse the constituency from Prancehurst, of course. I don't know exactly how you do nurse a

constituency, but I suppose you 'll be able to get the feeding bottle in London and I 'll supply the perambulators!"

"Thanks, old chap, a thousand thanks," said Merivale. And then at last he had an opportunity of asking and found voice to ask :

"You said something about your sister just now I did n't understand. So she 's still living at Prancehurst ?"

"Yes, rather. At least, not exactly. She insists on living with an old aunt of ours—a great-aunt to be accurate—in the Dower House. Do you remember it ? Not a bad little cottage on the outskirts of the Park."

"You 've been abroad so long," Monckton chimed in, "and you 've only got back so recently that you probably don't know that 'you have the pride of knowing one who has the privilege of being the brother of the foremost female writer of our time.' Is n't that right, Ted ?"

"Yes, that 's right," laughed Bowness. "Gad, won't she be amused when I tell her that you have never even heard of her books. There 's no nonsense about Muriel—that I must say—though she does write."

Merivale was about to reply: "I hope you won't tell her so," then with a wise afterthought he checked himself.

"Miss Bowness," said Radlet, for the second time that evening, with a quiet, convincing sincerity, "is a thundering good writer. Ted 's her brother and of course he does n't believe it. She has imagination and humor—humor without the bitterness of the ordinary authoress."

"Oh, I believe it all right," said Bowness, "but I can't very well say so. Besides, I 'm no judge. I only know one author who is any real use—and that 's Surtees. *Handley Cross* and *Mr. Sponge* are all I want. They 're good enough for me. There 's no novel in the world that is a patch on those. To tell the truth I think my sister's books are jolly good of their kind—for a woman, that is. But I 'm a man, and I confess I prefer a—a *dog-author!*!"

Everybody laughed and recognized the truth that lay under Bowness's rough humor and phraseology. Monckton exclaimed:

"Ted, you 're in excellent form to-night."

"I don't see that I 've said anything extraordinary," he replied, with the air of being half-ashamed; "if I have it is n't my fault. If Radlet *will* give us Pol Roger '84 he must take the consequences."

They had finished dinner and a move was presently made to the smoking-room. It was already getting late, and after Bowness and Merivale had

discussed plans and politics for half an hour or so, it was found to be time for them to go on to Lady Solightly's reception.

Bowness was a good friend, but the reader will have gathered that he was not naturally an enthusiast, not what he would have described as an impressionable, harum-scarum young idiot. And yet at the end of these few, short hours he had become a devoted partisan, an enthusiastic follower of his old college friend. Why was it ? The reason certainly did not lie in anything Merivale had said. He had said nothing remarkable. He had spoken, in fact, so far as he had spoken at all, in a style quite alien from the ordinary sympathies of Bowness. He had certainly the advantage of old friendship and he had no caste prejudice to overcome, for he was a landed proprietor himself and his manners were perfect, much better, indeed, than those of the ordinary country squire. But in the circumstances these qualities were not sufficient to account for the whole-hearted devotion with which the latter had espoused his cause. Why was it, then, that within an hour of making his acquaintance again, after a lapse of so many years, Ted Bowness was so eagerly pressing his hospitality on Merivale, placing his horses at his disposal,—and there is no man more particular in the world about lending his hunters than Ted Bowness,—and show-

ing himself so fervently anxious that he should come that he was tempting him with every bribe in his power? Why was it? It must be that there was in Merivale's personality some magnetic quality potent to stir enthusiasm in the mind, imagination, feelings (whichever it can deserve to be called) of the ordinary, unemotional man; an indescribable something which raises some men, like some nations, out of the ruck, and marks them out as extraordinary, influential, as leaders, conquerors. The ethnologists cannot explain that quality in a nation which produces the empire of an Athens or a Rome; the psychologist can explain it as little when it occurs in the individual. It is one of the unknown quantities of the human race, and that Merivale had some small share of this *x* is as certain as that in his voice there was a peculiar music.

Such was the course of the reflections which passed through Radlet's mind as he helped Merivale on with his coat that evening, and it was the recognition of this latent power in his friend that prompted the answer of that acute student of men and affairs when Merivale said to him:

“Thanks, a thousand thanks, old friend. I shall never forget your kindness. I can never repay the services you have rendered me——”

“Not at all,” he answered with a laugh that did not disguise the sincerity of his compliment. “I am

only backing a winning horse. You 'll repay me best by winning, as you are bound to do."

And Monckton too must have made a very similar deduction, though he showed it in a very different way, concealing his judgment with ironical banter. For, as they stood talking on the club steps before they parted, he said :

" Go and blarney your bumpkins and wheedle the drawing-room politicians,—but you would never persuade *me* to vote for you."

" But I shall persuade the free and independent electors of Prancehurst, all right," Merivale said, with a laugh that did not attempt to conceal his confidence.

" You may be right," Monckton said, looking at him narrowly through his half-closed eyelids. " It is often difficult to convince the individual, but it is nearly always easy to mislead a mob. And for you, I fancy, it would always be easy."

As he spoke, the words Radlet had uttered earlier in the evening echoed in his brain: " Merivale will certainly get there. Merivale will generally be right."

Yes, there was something about this old college friend of his which had developed into a power; a talent which had been cultivated so that it did very quickly impress the most opposite types of men as being extraordinary.

Or was it only, he asked himself, the magic of those low, vibrating tones, of that liquid, deep-strung voice, which, without effort, and it seemed without art on the part of the speaker, captivated the sense and absorbed the reason of his hearers?

No. Physically he had always been impressive. Now the latent, virile energy of the man was being called forth and was making itself felt through his pervading will and his splendid self-confidence.

"He will make enemies," was Monckton's conclusion, as he expressed it to Radlet, "but he will have to be acknowledged. And," he added, with intention, "he will have to be very careful. But after all the real question in these matters is, Has a man got luck? I shall wait to see if Merivale has luck. Certainly it looks now as if he had. But he also has a taint, a flaw somewhere."

If that was the impression that Merivale had produced on three such different and unimpressionable specimens of English society as Radlet, Monckton, and Bowness—Radlet the wise, Monckton the cynical, Bowness the indifferent—it was evident that his reputation was in a fair way to be made. As a matter of fact, if a man has any brains and friends and a little money, nothing is so easy to make as a reputation. The difficulty, or the bore, as the case may be, is to live up to it when made and to induce people to remember it. It requires the power of

work and the gift of application to maintain the first position gained and to progress, spreading in influence and reputation from one's own little circle of acquaintances outwards, even as the circle made by a stone cast into a pond spreads ever wider and wider. It is in his success or failure to do this that the test of a man lies. In the meantime, merely to have convinced such friends as these was no despicable asset for Merivale, for if they spoke of him as a man of the future, their friends would soon be ready to accept him as one of the men of the day. It is thus that the prophet unconsciously rigs his market.





CHAPTER VI

RECOMMENCEMENT

STUDY the biographies of great men of action and you will find that many of your heroes exhibit a curious tendency towards fatalism. They believe in their fate, their star. Through long periods of their existence they are content to drift in accordance with these supernatural influences. They do not wage war with fate, but are content to keep its conditions and make the most of them. They seize their opportunity, but only when it is offered. The world, they splendidly believe, is their oyster and they are confident that they will be able to open it, but they wait trustingly, patiently, till fate helps them to insert their knife between the shells of the bivalve.

The world had not hitherto had the occasion to perceive the greatness of Merivale; and yet he certainly was endowed with some of the qualities of greatness. Potentially he was great. Had his lot been cast on different lines, had the days of his

youth been spent otherwise than they were he might already (it is the verdict of all his friends and some of his enemies) have begun to carve for himself a niche in the temple of history; he may—who knows?—yet do so. Hitherto, so far as we have seen, he had drifted as other great men have drifted, waiting till opportunity offered. But in these periods of obscurity and retirement the great men who, as the French say, do *arrive*, are surely and laboriously developing; they are training for the struggle which they believe will some day come. When it comes the sudden strain puts them to the test and proves how conscientiously they have prepared themselves. Merivale had waited and his opportunity had come at last. The first rung of the ladder he had so long desired to climb was at his feet. He did not turn back. It remained to be seen whether his training of the past few years had been of the right sort.

His heart had already proved the weak spot in this man of ambition. His devotion to his mother had spoiled his youth. Was his heart to prove once again his undoing, was love to wreck his prime? No, he told himself—a thousand times, no! He was safe now. His old love for Muriel Bowness was dead, and had long been dead, killed with the experience of years and decently buried with all the romantic longings of his youth. There was no

possibility of his old love being allowed to revive. There were several reasons and one of overwhelming weight, which was ever haunting him, against that. It was utterly out of the question—out of the region of those practical politics with which he now was alone concerned. There was no place for women and certainly not for love or marriage in this new career of his. He was going to fight the great fight of personal ambition and he required all his energy to win. He was not going to take any unnecessary risks. Nor on the other hand was he going to be frightened away from the opportunity the gods had given him by any maudlin fear of the recrudescence of a mouldering sentiment.

And yet, had he examined that weak spot of his, his heart, a little more carefully, he would have discovered a symptom which might have given him pause.

Throughout the next few days, which were indeed very busily occupied, he made many observations. He observed, on their visit to the Cattle Show at Islington, that Ted Bowness, whilst he felt horses' legs and poked pigs as if he loved them, was greeted and his opinions were appreciated by innumerable people. He observed also that Ted's attitude towards him grotesquely resembled that mixture of admiration and affection which he had evinced towards one of his own prize pigs. He

observed that quite apart from his own abilities he was regarded by virtue of Ted's ownership as a likely horse, especially as he was to be trained by owner and run with owner up. He observed that among all these bluff, busy, downright country gentlemen Ted's was the opinion sought, Ted's the judgment almost invariably endorsed. And he further observed, that, when all the trappings were stripped from a question, when all the qualifications with which a too subtle intellect will obscure a case were thrust mercilessly aside, Ted's was almost invariably the answer of an honest conscience, Ted's the right, unvarnished decision of plain common-sense. And the result of all these observations was that he was glad of his friend and more grateful than before for his help and friendship.

One other observation he made in those intense, exciting days when he found himself standing at last on the threshold of a career. He met many men of note, many clever politicians, many able wire-pullers; he mentally measured himself against them and without conceit but with a thrill of cool satisfaction found himself in intellect their match, and believed himself in eloquence their superior. The power to do work when, but only when, he had a definite object before him, he knew himself sufficiently to possess. He was first relieved, then stimulated by the discovery that he could hold his

own; stimulated also by the sense of competition on every side of him, which is the power of a great city, and by the confident anticipation that when it came to the race he was capable of out-pacing all competitors. One man of all the men engaged in political life that he met abased his inexperienced pride, and lowered his new-found self-confidence. He had been dining with Lady Solightly, who had asked several well-known Members to meet him—asked them, that is, not formally but with that intention. Now Merivale was a man of no religion, but he had that day arrived at the conclusion that the exigencies of his candidature required him to be a strong Protestant. Religion he had none, and religion, in the end, is the only power that can keep a man straight—not love, nor philosophy, nor respect for society will suffice. He observed, indeed, a sort of careless tolerance of the opinions, persuasions, or convictions of others; for it was part of his cynical code that it is almost as foolish to scoff at other people's beliefs as it is to believe in them yourself.

When therefore he found himself, at Lady Solightly's informal dinner-party, sitting next to one of the leaders of the High Church party his sense of humor was tickled and his curiosity aroused. The tall, ascetic figure at his side, pale scion of a great house, sat tired, bent, and nervously silent,

whilst the waves of conversation and political speculation washed carelessly to and fro. They were discussing—how little at that time did they foresee it—the main point on which the next general election was to turn. Merivale threw in a remark with reference to the quarrelsomeness of Christians, speaking in the cynical tone natural to him on that subject. Then:

“ What do you think ? ” he appealed provokingly to the quiet youth at his left.

“ Even in our quarrels we are guided by the Most High towards a perfect ending.”

The remark revealed an intensity of belief, assumed an acceptance of the eternal presence of Divinity in all things so absolutely alien from Merivale’s agnostic habit of opinion that he was startled out of himself by an almost naïve intellectual interest in the mental condition of his neighbor.

“ Do you *really* believe that ? ” he asked. The words were out of his mouth before he could check himself. They were crude, they were rude, unintentionally insulting to a faith so fervent. But it would only have made matters worse to explain the mere intellectual curiosity which had prompted the question. And indeed Merivale could hardly regret it. For the intense sincerity, the burning eloquence which marked the vehement reply it called forth

taught him a lesson he never forgot; taught him that before such enthusiasm and sincerity as this the mere man of the world, be he never so clever, is as a child, and that there was a weakness in his own armor, a blemish somewhere in his own life (he could not allow himself too curiously to inquire where or why), which had deprived him of this priceless asset of sincere enthusiasm.

He shirked the question just as, refusing to allow himself to examine that weak spot of his, his heart, he had failed to admit one very significant observation which he might have made during the last week. For it really was strange that never once yet had he spoken to Ted about his sister. Of course they had been busy, but was that really the reason? He knew, and if he had allowed himself to examine his heart, he would have had to confess that he was all the time curious and yet did not dare to permit himself to satisfy his curiosity. It was partly out of shame arising from this silence that he did not immediately buy some of her books. He noticed, however, with amusement, that among the friends of Ted whom he met it was Ted who was the oracle, not, as clearly had been the case with Radlet, Ted's sister, the novelist.

It was not till they were on the train, speeding towards Prancehurst, that Muriel's name was mentioned between them. Then Ted remarked casually

that he had told his wife to ask Muriel to come in to dinner that night.

" I wonder if you remember her ? " he added.

" Yes; very well indeed. But tell me more about her. I have n't had time to read or even to get her books yet."

" You need n't bother about her books," returned Ted. " She 's not that sort." He was always rather nervously anxious to preserve his sister from the reputation of being a blue-stocking. He felt slightly ashamed of the fact that she wrote books but fervently grateful to her for being what he called " a real good sort " in spite of it.

" Muriel 's rather a rum 'un," he pursued reflectively, taking the cigar from his mouth and examining the ash. " I don't know that I *can* tell you very much about her. The fact is I always say she is two people rolled into one. Full of go and pluck and rides very straight to hounds and all that sort of thing, and no nonsense, no, er—no literary *rot* about her, you know. And then, she 's another person, too. She writes these novels, and between ourselves they *are* damned good, although they seem a trifle fanciful to me. Rather too dreamy for my taste. Then, she does n't marry, and she lives at the little Dower House with rather an old tartar of an aunt of ours, although, especially since my grandmother died last year, she is really a great

heiress. What is a fellow to make of all that? I don't know. I just choose to see in her only the jolly, rollicking chum she always used to be."

"It is easy enough to understand," said Merivale. "She has got a sense of balance and a sense of humor. Lots of clever people have had that before her,—Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, for instance."

"Oh, well, yes—but she's not Shakespeare or Scott."

"No. But what I mean is that she is like them in being sane—for an author."

"Oh, yes, she's sane enough." Ted assented.

"I should imagine," said Merivale meditatively, "that she is very happy."

"Happy? Rather, of course she's happy," replied Ted, who did not understand why anybody should be anything else. "Well, here we are. We shall have a jolly drive up. I like this train, always come by it—it just gets you in in time to turn round and then dress for dinner. Ah, Nero! Nero! Down, sir!" he cried to a handsome Gordon setter who was leaping up to welcome his master home.

"He *would* come, sir," said the groom apologetically.

"He *would*, would he?" said Ted, patting the dog's head; "that's all right. I will drive. There are six things for the luggage cart. Come on, Arthur.

Good-night, Mr. Goode"—to the station master, who stood hat in hand at the door of the little station. "How's the kid? Flourishing? That's all right. Good-night."

He drew the whip gently across the bay mare's back and amid a shower of gravel from her hoofs they whirled out of the station yard.

They bowled along in silence through the well wooded lanes and between the high, luxuriant hedges which give to the English country its intimate, peaceful charm. Occasionally they skirted a village wherein the roses and honeysuckle sprang from tiny gardens and mingling with geraniums, creepers, and nasturtiums clambered over the windows of lovely irregular Tudor houses, none the less delightful because they were scrupulously neat and clean; or they passed a farm snugly surrounded by haystacks and buildings, with, close at hand, its quaint, picturesque oast-house grimly waiting its tribute of those delicate hops which had converted the neighboring rows of bare poles into a forest of green leaves and were busy weaving with their dainty tendrils sweet bowers of health and shade. On their right stretched the long slopes of the Surrey hills, round which the haze of a summer evening hung like a coronet of amethyst and gold. On their left ran the old Park wall of Prancehurst.

The charm of the South Country was upon Meri-

vale. A feeling of intense happiness, of subdued but infinite enjoyment came over him.

As they turned into the Park, Ted cried a cheery "Good-night, Maggie!" to the red-cheeked, white-frocked, smiling, buxom lass who had emerged from the keeper's lodge and curtsied as she held the white gates open.

"Pretty girl, Maggie Bateson," he observed, flicking his whip. Funny thing she should be, too! Bateson is as ugly as sin, and her mother—well, she's not exactly ugly, but she is as unlike Maggie as she can be. A throw-back, I suppose, eh?"

But Merivale only grunted a reply. He was sucking out the advantage of the sweet freshness, the rich peace of an English country home.

They are a national heritage, those stately homes of England, with their high traditions, their splendid insularity, their noble lessons of duty done and homage rendered. They are a national heritage which should never have been put at the mercy of a radical Chancellor of the Exchequer!

Arthur Merivale saw once again the Home Farm and, for the first time, Ted's pet hobby, the Model Dairy. He saw before him the long stretches of lush grass; the noble trees lavishly spaced, with the foliage of their lower branches closely and regularly cropped by Ted's famous shorthorns; he saw

the white line of the curving drive, the fine gravel of which gave that peculiar, homelike, welcoming scrunch from the wheels; he saw the neat iron railing of the ladies' ride; the trim copses and the likely coverts through which the turrets of the house were just charmingly visible; he saw, this July evening, the strutting, secure pheasants on the outskirts of the wood, and the gambolling, impertinent rabbits out there by the warren—and there, yes! there the little, roughly levelled cricket ground, carefully fenced in to keep the cattle out—some of the “men about the place,” loyal servants loyally served, practising at the nets after the labors of the day, and in the centre the light green strip of closely cut turf which is the match pitch. It is the famous ground from which in '64 the old Squire hit a ball over the tall elm that used to stand yonder, the elm that fell in the great storm of '92—the famous ground on which Arthur Merivale had bowled out the Southdown team in the eighties!

Who that has not seen and heard these things can tell, who that has seen and known them needs to be told of the leaping of the heart, the sob in the throat, which the sight of their familiar homeliness brings to one who has been a wanderer on the face of the earth and never hoped, perhaps, to see them again?

Arthur Merivale saw and felt these things to the

uttermost. His intensely impressionable nature was stirred to the depths by the sudden, blissful cure of his nostalgia. The gnawing love of home which is the Englishman's birthright was deeply satisfied. For the first time in all these restless, discontented years he realized that what all along he had needed was to come home to some such place as this; and that it was here it was good for him to be. This was the place to soothe his melancholy, calm the fever of his ambition, and give him heart's ease at last.

"I never realized how beautiful Prancehurst is." So he broke the silence, and he added with a rush of sympathy, taking a point of view that was significant. "I don't wonder your sister does n't want to leave it. What can the world give in exchange for a home like this?"

It was curious how completely for him Muriel's influence seemed to pervade the place. He was aware of the fact and noted it calmly as one who is sure of himself and master of his emotions. It was certainly quite natural that the scent of that by-gone sentiment should hang thus, not unpleasantly, about the trees of the old Park which had seen its blossoming.

He sat up in his seat and pressed his foot against the splash-board of the dog-cart. That was all it was and that was all it could possibly be, he told

himself—bygone sentiment. The repetition of the fact confirmed him in his belief that he was master of the event. He was not going to take any more risks. There must be this time no swerving from the path. He must make straight for the goal of ambition—and of honor.

Yet he might have felt a qualm of doubt had he known how vividly in the imagination of the girl whom he thus dismissed as a risk to be avoided, as a danger which he could successfully escape, his presence, his personality, had figured, beneath those very trees, throughout the long years of silence and separation.

When they arrived at the manor and Merivale had been introduced to his hostess—a pretty little blonde, mentally colorless—he found that Ted's description was correct. There was just time to turn round and then, his luggage having been unpacked meantime, to dress for dinner. Whilst he was tying his tie with the neatness and precision characteristic of him, he heard the carriage drive up and knew that Muriel had arrived. He had intended to hurry downstairs in order to glance at the *St. James Gazette* which, after being stitched and ironed, had been brought into the drawing-room just before they went upstairs to dress. Now he changed his mind. He decided to smoke a cigarette instead and to wait till dinner was an-

nounced. He did not feel inclined to face the *mauvais quart d'heure* before dinner with Muriel. He admitted to himself that he was nervous—frightened almost of meeting her. He took off his evening coat, put on a smoking-jacket, and flung himself onto the lounge in his room. Whatever his reflections may have been, they did not seem to be very pleasant ones. For his hands clenched spasmodically, he muttered and frowned and gnawed his under-lip and flicked the ash off his cigarette with a frequent, irritated gesture. At last, some five minutes after the second gong had sounded, he threw his half-smoked cigarette into the fire-place, said "damn!" with intention, and, getting up, changed his coat slowly. When he entered the drawing-room he had certainly mastered his nervousness and ill-humor, or else the excellence of his manners sufficed to conceal the trepidation of his spirit. Nothing could have been more indifferent and correct than the cold tone in which he apologized for being late; nothing more perfectly polite, more just sufficiently pleased than the tone and manner in which he replied to Muriel's—

" How do you do, Mr. Merivale ? It is a long time since we met."

" Yes, is n't it ? Absurdly long. And how are you ? "

Mentally he was noting his surprise that she had changed. She had matured, certainly, both in manner and appearance. Yet he had not been prepared for any alteration. He had somehow expected to see just the same blithe, slim, careless girl as of yore. He found, before five minutes conversation had passed, that he was in the presence of a mature personality, curiously sympathetic indeed, but almost completely strange to him. And this very strangeness pleased him and put him at his ease immediately. For it meant, did it not, the removal of a danger in his path.

With her it was different. When Ted had first written to tell her of Merivale's impending visit, she had found herself grievously troubled. She had even seriously contemplated the project of paying a flying visit to Lady Solightly in town, to avoid him. For she was frightened and a little annoyed at the idea of his coming into her life again. She had grown content with the ideal image of him in her mind; she had ceased to long for the man, she was so happy with the counterfeit presentment of him her imagination had formed. She felt jealous of the coming of this fleshly reality which might clash with her spiritual abstraction. There had been times in the past when she was not so content: when her whole being cried aloud for him to come, and he came not; when her thoughts

of him seemed only to accentuate her need of his coming—and he came not. But with the fleeting of the years her feelings, her point of view rather, had altered by imperceptible degrees. The days of her yearning had passed; the moods now no longer recurred in which she had cried, “O my beloved, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is lovely!”

By this time—she knew it must be so—the Merivale of her dreams had become a very thin and shadowy counterfeit of the real man. He had developed, coarsened, toughened as men will in contact with the world; but her conception of him had by imperceptible degrees drifted away from actuality, until in the impracticable Utopia of her maidenly imagination, he had become the very perfect gentle knight of romance. She had long ceased to hope that she would ever see him again—almost even, as we have seen, to desire such a consummation. When occasionally the possibility of his actual re-entry into her matter-of-fact life did present itself to her, she shrank before the consciousness it brought with it that she might be disappointed. Nothing, she knew too well by this time, ever proves to be so good as we have fondly anticipated, just as no apple ever tastes so good as it smells. There was another more subtle reason why she was not content to see him. She was

afraid of meeting the man she knew so well partly because she felt that she would not be sure of herself in the presence of one with whom she was, without his knowing it, on terms of such peculiar intimacy ; partly because she experienced the natural dread of putting her ideal to the test, of comparing her ideal hero and familiar friend with the actual stranger, the veritable man of the world she must now discover him to be. It is the same instinct that makes history unpalatable and candid friends unpopular. Humanity hugs its errors with pathetic constancy and hates the exposure of its outworn beliefs.

She was so happy now in her work, without him. Why should he come into her life again ? And yet all the time, at the back of her protesting, she was aware of a curiosity and also of a shrinking little hope which she would not allow herself to formulate. But this curiosity and this hope it was that carried the day. She decided to stay at home and to welcome an old friend in the new candidate for their constituency. It was natural, was it not, that she should be glad to see her brother's old friend again, after all these years ? And Aunt Dorcas had reaped the benefit of her gladness in an outburst of merry humor and tender sympathy on the part of her unaccountable niece. Her thoughts turned with gratitude to the failure

of that first book—the “ message ” as she in her callow girlhood had called it. She was now profoundly thankful for its ill-success and, armed with the knowledge that Merivale was most unlikely to have read it, she found herself ready to meet him on equal terms. She was confident that she would be able to keep her secret. It would be interesting surely and it might be delightful to compare the reality with her shadowy ideal.

After they had taken their seats at the dinner-table, they spoke for a short time of the places which Merivale had visited in his travels. Merivale wore his knowledge lightly ; he was communicative, instructive even, without being oppressive. When he found the conversation was degenerating into a monologue he broke away from his subject, which happened to be Morocco, with the suggestion to Muriel—

“ It is a fascinating place. You should lay the plot of one of your novels there.”

“ Oh, my novels ! ” Muriel laughed with a deprecating air ; “ and does n’t it sound as if I were a hen, that goes strutting and scratching round the various parts of the world looking for a place to lay —a plot ! ”

“ Yes,” said Ted ; “ but that ’s just what these literary chaps do. If there ’s a row in any little unheard-of spot on earth half a dozen of them

immediately write a novel about it,—instead of letting the wretched place settle down in peace.”

“ The painters are just as bad,” Merivale added. “ As soon as any new celebrity is discovered they all run after him, nest-egg in hand,—to borrow Miss Bowness’s simile,—trying to get him to sit. Anyhow, I ’m not going to join in abuse of successful writers in your sister’s presence.”

“ Please don’t think of me as a successful writer,” cried Muriel.

“ Why not ? ”

“ Well, you know what that means nowadays ? It describes as a rule one who combines the art of a reporter with the business instincts of a modern novelist.”

“ Mr. Merivale is unprejudiced about you,” Ted Bowness put in; “ he has n’t read a single word you ’ve written.”

Merivale could not help thinking that Muriel looked really pleased, as she turned to him inquiringly for confirmation of the charge.

“ It is too true,” he stammered. “ I have been abroad so long——”

“ Please don’t apologize,” she said smiling; “ I am really very glad you have met me again before meeting my novels. At any rate now you know the worst. But honestly, I had much rather you had n’t read them.”

And that was true, for it made her quite certain that he had not understood her girlish "message." But she explained her pleasure otherwise.

"It makes you quits with me. For I know as little about your politics as you do about my books. I hope they 're not as dull."

"We must educate each other."

"Yes. Tell me about your politics."

"They are just like those of everybody else. But tell me about your books."

"They are just like those of everybody else."

"I 'm sure they 're not. They must be original. You would not meekly follow the fashion."

"No. That is true," Muriel answered after reflection; "I am perhaps too much inclined to avoid the fashion for its own sake."

"That is much better, at any rate, than always blindly conforming. Conformity to fashion is the poor pretence of taste maintained by those who do not know how to dress; the poor pretence of manners maintained by those who do not know how to behave; the poor pretence of judgment maintained by those who are too stupid to decide for themselves. It is the signal of distress hung out by those who are naturally dependent—the color of the naturally colorless—the lord of the serfs of life, who, however free and prosperous they may think

they are, will always only recruit the ranks of slaves of society."

"That sounds rather Radical, does n't it?" said Mrs. Bowness, timidly.

"I don't think so, Mrs. Bowness," returned Merivale; "it only expresses my distrust of majorities."

"But if you are elected -- by a majority?" suggested Muriel.

"It will only strengthen my belief in minorities," laughed Merivale. "But seriously that does n't affect my argument. What I mean is that majorities never have ruled and never will. The many always follow the few in any nation where the few are not intolerably foolish and corrupt. The few set the fashion and the many follow it as I have described. And as with a nation, so with a group of nations. The small nations have always ruled the large. The children of Abraham, the autochtones of Athens, the tribe of Romulus, the few thousands who dwell in our little island "lost in the fogs of the North Sea"—have they not vindicated the rights of minorities by founding the empires of Solomon, of Athens, and of Rome, and the British Empire? That incidentally is the answer to those who try to scare us with a Yellow Peril. The yellow races will never rule us for the very reason on account of which we are told to be

afraid of them—because their population is so numerous."

"That's not a bad paradox," said Bowness; "but I seem to have heard of Goths and Huns and German hordes that wiped out Rome."

Merivale was silent, refusing to be drawn further, or perhaps weighing in his mind the objection raised to his theory.

"It reminds me of the old debating days at Oxford to hear you talk like that again," Bowness observed.

"But you must beware of paradox and epigram in a constituency like this," Muriel half seriously warned him.

"You may be sure I shall follow your advice," returned he; "epigrams I know get garbled in transmission and paradoxes are not understood. Vague phrases that seem plain, vague promises that seem definite but can be explained away are, apart from personalities, the things that win elections. But you will observe that the election phrases are invented by the clever few to be echoed by the ignorant many. They say that we are governed nowadays by the voice of the people, which is the voice of God—*vox populi, vox Dei*;—you might as well say, *vox populi*, Vauxhall! It means about as much. For the voice of the people is entirely concerned with singing in chorus the phrases that are put

into its mouth and is as little responsible for the meaning of them as the choir of St. Paul's for the meaning of *Stabat Mater*. We stuff the people with phrases just as the sausage-seller Cleon stuffed the Athenian Demos with promises and hare-pie. Under the influence of phrase the free and independent elector votes, as he supposes, for the untarnished glory of the flag, which he has probably never seen, for the maintenance of the glorious British Empire, though he has not the least idea where it is, except that there the sun never sets—somewhere in the East he vaguely imagines it to be, for he knows the sun sets in the west; or again, under the influence of phrase, he promptly votes for some such swelling trope as the preservation of the great principle of the liberty of the subject—a principle which, like the agitators in Hyde Park, he usually interprets to mean the liberty of the subject to—to, well, to make himself an object!"

Merivale paused and took a slow sip of Ted's excellent claret.

" You will lose the seat if you talk like that," Muriel said solemnly.

" Is that a rebuke or a compliment ? "

" A rebuke, surely."

Merivale laughed.

" You 're right, and I shall take your warning. I never talk like that outside a dining-room."

It was clear then that he had all the cynicism necessary to the successful politician. Muriel could not help feeling a little disappointed at that discovery, whilst she was intellectually both surprised and delighted at the brilliancy of his observations.

"And yet," he pursued after a pause, "why should n't we say these things in public?"

"They are too true," said Ted Bowness.

"They sound too young," said Muriel; "and they might be believed."

"And is it only the young who are in danger of telling the truth? Or do you mean, in my case, people would distrust a man of my years who seemed to be younger than he was? It is a sound cause of distrust, I know. But it is n't a risk I usually run. Only somehow, being here again, among my old friends, I do feel twenty years younger—as if I were back in those old Oxford days of which Ted spoke. It is a curious, delightful sensation, and there is no danger of its being too common a mood, I fear."

He spoke feelingly, moved beyond his wont by the sympathetic atmosphere in which he found himself, stimulated by Muriel's quick retorts, understood by brother and sister so completely that, as both had suggested, he had indeed for the time being thrown off the burden of past years and

put on the gayety and irresponsibility of youth. And the soft modulations, the liquid, subtly-changing tone of his wonderful voice lent an exaggerated charm and effectiveness to all he said.

"I could shut my eyes and be content just to listen without understanding a word, my dear, when he is talking," said Mrs. Bowness to Muriel as they sat alone in the drawing-room after dinner toasting their feet over a small wood fire, whilst the men drank a glass of port and smoked a cigarette. And Mrs. Bowness was not an impressionable person. To Muriel the sound of that voice heard once again in its developed richness and compass had been as some marvellous wine, delicate, smooth, intoxicating.

It filled her with a quiet, intense happiness to which she had long been a stranger. It was only the voice, she answered herself. Oh yes, of course, only the voice. But she felt strangely grateful to her sister-in-law for having experienced the magic of it. She had never been so drawn to her as she was to-night. She began to think she had never appreciated her before. She put her arm round her waist and kissed her, as if to seal the bond with this new-found sympathizer. May Bowness, not understanding, but still genuinely pleased, kissed her in return, calling her a "silly old dear." And Muriel argued to herself that she had no reason to

be surprised that May had succumbed to the spell. For any one, however dull and unsympathetic, must have acknowledged a gift like his. Verily honey and milk were under his tongue and on his lips sat persuasion.

She remained gazing into the wood fire and her thoughts drifted away in her dreamy fashion to the imaginary companion of her past days. She considered and compared the real and the ideal and was bound to confess she was not so disappointed as she had feared she might be. It was amusing and also rather a relief to find that he had not heard of her books. It was another proof of the smallness of a great reputation, and a timely reproof for any little vanity she might be developing. For, without conceit and jesting apart, she knew that she was what she had disclaimed being, one of the most successful writers of the day, and, what she valued much more highly, her place among women of letters was recognized as second to none. Her second novel had proved a notable success, her third and fourth had added greatly to her great reputation. It was a reputation both honestly gained and richly deserved. She could proudly reflect that hers had indeed been a legitimate success. For, just as much as Aunt Dorcas, she had a natural horror of the literary female as she imagined the type—that strange amalgam of shallow

understanding and blatant self-assertion which managed some years ago to impress itself upon the public mind as the inevitable representative of the lady writers. She had not and never could learn to practise the arts of the public authoress; she could not understand why her photograph should have any influence towards prompting appreciation of her novels. Her opinion on babies she never confided to an inquiring public; and, though the world might be never so inquisitive, it never learnt with regard to her fondness for bicycling either the fact or the reason of it. Her views on matrimony had they been confided would have been found disappointingly ordinary. The great heart of the people was never soothed by the information that the openwork of her stockings was real lace; she had not the heart to earn notoriety by keeping a bevy of the tiniest dogs in the world or any other monstrosities: she thought the place for tigers and snakes was the menagerie or the jungle and not her boudoir, and for cats—even Aunt Dorcas's cats—she had no affinity. She was not morbid enough to imagine herself persecuted by critics or erotic enough to be kidnapped or to elope with a handsome burglar. She was intellectually too conscientious to write of things which she did not understand, socially too sensitive to describe those whom she knew and thereby, as she would have

said, "consign them to oblivion." She was too sweet-tempered to make enemies, too broad-minded to cater to a sect. What chance had she of *reclame* or of becoming a popular authoress? She was not even ugly, and she had no command of abuse.

Yet, with all these disadvantages, she came near to achieving the impossible. Her books were increasingly bought and not infrequently read by strangers. Critics came to recognize in her the conscience of the artist and to credit her with that rare quality of genius which is the uncontended care of doing better.

Well, he at any rate had not read her books or heard of her fame! She was half pleased and half disappointed, and fell to thinking of the strange ironies of an author's fate, which so astonishingly misdirects his aim and causes him often to bring down very different game from that which he had expected. He aims at a bishop, and bags a non-conformist; composes a moral treatise and is branded as a heretic, or writes in irony and is read in earnest. Anyhow, she told herself, it would be nice, Mr. Merivale being here. That meant that there would be one person at least in the neighborhood with whom she could talk sometimes about the bookish side of her life. For though her sweet temper and her sense of humor seldom allowed her to show it, she did sometimes miss the intellectual

interest which was so sadly to seek at Prancehurst; she did sometimes pine for a more sympathetic companion than her Aunt Dorcas or one who burnt with the generous fires of enthusiasm more freely than her sister-in-law. Here at least was somebody with whom she would be able to share the pleasurable excitement of appreciating a new book.

The door opened and Merivale and her brother came in, rousing her from her reverie. They talked for some little time, but it was chiefly Ted who spoke, discussing local politics and describing the views and personalities of men of importance in the district. Merivale said very little and Muriel was content to sit and watch the eager concentration and the quick comprehension with which he followed, weighed, accepted Ted's summary. They were interrupted by the announcement that the carriage had come to take Muriel home.

"I am afraid my business has rather monopolized the conversation," said Merivale, apologetically, as they rose to say good-bye.

"But it interests me," Muriel answered simply. Then with a smile she added, "We agreed to educate each other, did n't we?"

"I am impatient for you to fulfil your part of the bargain," said Merivale.

"Really, you know, I have nothing worth teaching."

"Indeed you have. I believe you can teach me the secret of being happy."

"The secret of happiness? Ah, we both know that. Work, is n't it? Well, good-night. Ted, you will bring Mr. Merivale to see us at the Dower House, won't you. That is, if you care to come."

Merivale bowed and murmured that he would be delighted.

"I am sure my aunt will be charmed to see you. Good-night."

As Merivale undressed that night he thought over that answer of hers to the absolute exclusion of those political questions which should have occupied his mind. "The secret of happiness? Ah, we both know that. Work, is n't it?" That answer, like some of her other sayings that evening, seemed to show such an extraordinary sympathy with his state of mind, such a wonderful understanding of his past. "She must have been through the same sort of thing as I have," he thought. "The difference is that she has not sulked or fretted, as I did. She has stuck to it—made the best of it—made her way. An heiress and as beautiful and more attractive than ever! Why has she lived on here and never married? She must have had some affair of the heart. I wonder—no, no! It is impossible. I must n't even think of it. Even if it might have been, it

can't be now. God! What have I done? What a mess I have made of my life, whilst she has been ordering hers so calmly, wisely! Damn!"

He blew out the candle and got into bed.

"That's all over now," he said through his clenched teeth. "I'm going to start fresh this time and nothing shall stop me. I am going *to do something at last.*"

An observation from which it may be gathered that even with those years on the Continent which had conduced so markedly to his development, Arthur Merivale was not at all satisfied. And he was not the man to underrate his own achievements.





CHAPTER VII

TIME'S REVENGES

IT was nearly a week before Ted and Merivale found time to pay their promised visit to Muriel, for they were both busy with this new political game of theirs—at once the most absorbing and vexatious game in the world.

"It's a more riling game than golf," Merivale observed to Muriel later.

"Yes," she returned, "but golf is hardly a game, is it? At least it always seemed to me not so much a game as a proceeding!"

And in the course of this game of politics there were many comings and goings at Prancehurst, soundings and confabulations, hints and undertakings, protests, warnings, compromises. Agents, chairmen of leagues, and crotchety landowners came in battalions and kept both Ted and Merivale in a turmoil of excitement and stirred in them a fever of alertness.

But at the end of the week Ted said he thought

they had time to run down to tea at the Dower House. Merivale had never proposed to do so; but now when it was suggested he cordially welcomed the idea of the visit.

"I must warn you," said Ted, "that you will find my aunt rather a queer customer, very likely. She is unlike anybody I know, and she is very bitter in what she says and the way she says it. I suppose it comes of being an old maid."

"That 's odd," Merivale reflected. "I always think that nobody has a better chance of being happy than the maiden lady of modern days, the spinster aunt of our experience. Given, as she usually is, a few hundreds a year and a record of sixty virtuous summers; given the reminiscences of the friends of her youth, who, subdued perhaps by time, rise before her as a panorama of perfect people, whom she has lost, but whom she is sure that somewhere, in some world, some day, she will meet again and know in full; given the memory of a love that never found its mortal close and the hope of its sequel in heaven; given, in fact, few cares and no vices, and I know no one who should be more happy or who proves as a rule more unselfish and more contented."

"I daresay that 's all right," said Ted Bowness, "but that 's not the matter with Aunt Dorcas."

They drove up, as he spoke, to the garden gate

of the Dower House. Muriel was standing in the path that led up to the cottage, trimming roses. Her gardening basket was slung over her arm, rough leather gauntlets were on her dainty hands, scissors dangled at her side, and over the rich bloom of her brilliant complexion hung the shade of her black hair and the waving lines of her sweeping, simple, dainty garden hat. When she saw the arrivals, a beautiful smile of welcome showed her white teeth shining between the thin red line of her lips.

"I thought you were never coming!" she said, too honest to feel the need of artifice.

"You may be sure it 's only because we 've been so busy," said Merivale.

"And how are things going?"

"First-rate, I think."

"Old Dodge-my-eye is going to withdraw all right," said Ted, "and Sir James is going to retire as soon as Merivale is ready."

"Oh! I 'm glad. It would have been awful to have had that man as our member. He 's so odiously, oilily attentive to me as it is! I thought he was going to propose to me over the soup the other night, when he took me in to dinner. Imagine being proposed to over the soup! And what of the electors, Mr. Merivale?"

"Oh! Ted 's an excellent canvasser. To tell the

truth, I am always a little afraid he will cry ' Yoicks! Gone away!' when he is called upon to speak. But he does all the business. They don't mind hearing me talk, but they 'll vote for me because I am Ted's candidate, and they can trust him."

He was startled by a thin, querulous voice at his elbow, saying:

" Then they are very sensible folk!"

It was Aunt Dorcas. Never was Merivale more fortunate in his electioneering than in the speech which introduced him to Aunt Dorcas. For the one soft spot in that lady's heart which anybody had yet discovered was her love and admiration for her stalwart, honest nephew.

" My aunt, Miss Cantling," said Muriel.

Arthur took off his hat.

" I was disappointed not to meet you at dinner the other night," said Merivale, readily.

" I never go out at night," replied Aunt Dorcas, severely.

" Oh!" Merivale answered, not quite knowing what to say. " I am afraid you are delicate?"

" You mean you know I am old," returned the acid spinster. " But I am not delicate. I am never ill—*never!* Even Muriel cannot accuse me of that. I do not approve of people being ill. But I am getting on in years and therefore I do not go out at night. I am afraid, if I did, that I might have a fit."

"A fit?" repeated Merivale, with surprised concern.

"Yes, a fit," returned Miss Cantling in her thin, staccato tones. "Not that I have ever had one. But I might have, and I *object* to being ill."

"You cannot be too careful, certainly," Merivale returned, trying to conceal his perplexity.

Muriel smiled.

"Let us go indoors," she said, "or we shall all roast in this sun."

As they were moving into the Dower House Miss Cantling spoke again to Merivale.

"So you are going to try to get into Parliament, I understand? I hope you will succeed; in fact, you are sure to, with Ted's support. I don't know anything about politics myself. I never have been interested in them and I don't see why I should begin now. But Muriel has begun to take a great interest in them lately. I am sure I don't know why."

Muriel flushed and felt grateful to Merivale when he said with apparent indifference:

"She is following her brother's good example, I suppose." Then turning to Muriel he added:

"I am delighted to hear that we have so valuable an ally." Aunt Dorcas seemed annoyed for some reason.

"Well," she said in her most acid manner, "I

suppose it is no worse for her to do that than to waste all her time scribbling."

Aunt Dorcas, it will be seen, had not changed her opinion, or her expression of it, since Muriel's success. She refused absolutely to believe that there could be anything in the least good or original in her books. Whenever she did hear of anything or read anything good that Muriel had written, she always asked her, "Where did you get that from?" or "Who put that into your head?" The galling assumption was implied that nothing good could come out of such a head as hers unless it was first crammed in.

"Not that I think it at all the proper thing for ladies to take part in elections," she continued, "it was not done in my time, I can assure you. In fact," she added, thoughtfully, "I do not approve of elections at all. I believe they lead to a great deal of drinking and bad language. No, decidedly I do not approve of elections. And I do not think ladies ought to be mixed up with beer-drinking—or any kind of argument whatever."

"Remember that, Muriel," said Ted, trying not to laugh: "Aunt Dorcas does not approve of elections!"

But Merivale, with a perfect command of his features, replied politely to the old lady:

"Ladies are the most valuable helpers we have,

though, now, Miss Cantling. They are so valuable just because they are so charming."

Aunt Dorcas, however, was not at all mollified by this remark. General praise of women, indeed, always irritated her. Their charm as a sex seemed not so much to cast a reflection as to throw a lurid light on her own individual spinsterhood. And the fact was that Aunt Dorcas had never been able to make up her mind to be resigned and thank God for that single state of life to which it had pleased Him to call her! Eulogy of women, therefore, nettled her as apparently implying the absence in her of the qualities for which they were eulogized. And of the new generation of women in particular, with their peculiar habits of forwardness, praise to her was intolerable. It made her feel that she belonged to a past generation, and she had neither the philosophy nor the generosity to accept the fact with resignation and humor. Aunt Dorcas, then, was nettled by Merivale's well-meant observations, and when she was nettled it was her habit to inflict Muriel.

She waited, therefore, in silence for an opening, and this Merivale unfortunately gave her at once. A glance round the cosy little room into which they had come showed him an unusual quantity of well-filled book-shelves—the most excellent of all furniture. The uncontrollable habit of a man who has

read much and acquired, through natural taste or the necessity of fortune, the habit of relying on the companionship of books led him to take up a new book that lay on the table and glance at it.

" You have some delightful books here, I see," he observed to Aunt Dorcas.

" Oh, they are not my books," she returned quickly. " Muriel is the literary person here, you know."

She proceeded to explain to a fidgety audience that the dear child had always been fond of scribbling and reading stupid fiction and that now she had written some trashy work of her own. Of course, Aunt Dorcas added, she could not manage to read them, all of them, herself, and perhaps those she had not read might have something in them. But, for her part, Scott was good enough for her and the little time she could spare for reading she filled up with Scott!

Merivale edged away from Aunt Dorcas whilst she was giving vent to this withering explanation of the library, and, as soon as she had finished, he said in a low voice that was not otherwise obtrusively sympathetic :

" I want to begin my education; will you show me your books and tell me on which I ought to begin ? "

" There they are," said Muriel, pleased, and far

too genuine to attempt to conceal her pleasure. She pointed to ten volumes in a corner of one of the book-shelves.

" You see they are not so numerous as you have been led to expect."

" And which is the first ? I should like to start with that if I may."

" Oh, no ! Please don't," Muriel said quickly. A hot flush had mounted to her forehead and she clasped her hands nervously. Merivale could not understand why she seemed so embarrassed. But her pleading left no doubt as to the sincerity of her vehement depreciation of that novel.

" *Please* don't read that,—my first novel, you see, achieved a very, very—brilliant reverse!"

" But I should honestly like to read it first," said Merivale, more than half with the intention of teasing her, and also for the sake of watching that flush on her face, and that eager, pleading look in her eyes and mouth. " I really believe your first book would be even more interesting, to one who has had the pleasure of meeting you, than your later and more popular ones."

Muriel looked genuinely troubled. Then she broke into a laugh.

" You are a very unruly pupil," she said, " and I refuse to teach you, unless you follow my directions."

"Then I am all humility," said Merivale.
"Which is it to be?"

Muriel pulled three volumes from the shelf.
"Here it is," she said, handing it to him. "*Sir Patrick Puddiepha's Daughter* was my first success and it is the best thing I shall ever do. That doesn't mean that I think it at all good. And I am certain that it would be much better for you to read Bryce's *American Commonwealth* or *Questions of the Moment*, or *Hints for Young Politicians*, or something serious and practical."

"Much," said Aunt Dorcas, overhearing the last remark; "but," she went on, "as I see you have time to waste, I hope you will come to lunch tomorrow—after church, that is, for it is Sunday."

"It is very kind of you," said Merivale, "and I should like to come immensely. But, unfortunately, we are engaged to lunch with a friend, the ex-candidate—and you will understand how important that engagement is."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Muriel.
"But we might look in to tea on our way back," suggested Ted.

And it was settled that they should.
"Punctually at half-past four," was Aunt Dorcas's last injunction. "And mind you come!"
"Funny creature, Aunt Dorcas, is n't she? But, by Jove, you must have made a great hit with

her! I never saw her so cordial to a stranger before!" said Bowness, as they drove away. He did not say this with the slightest intention of apology; for any eccentricity of manner, so long as it occurred in the Bowness family, seemed to him, if not exactly permissible, at any rate in the order of things permitted. Aunt Dorcas might not be acceptable, but she had to be accepted. Being a Bowness, she was no more to be criticised than a blizzard. You may not like a sharp frost, but you cannot possibly adopt a critical or contemptuous tone towards it, and to apologize for it would be equally ridiculous.

"Yes," said Merivale, "she interests me immensely and I really like her, but I should think she is one of those people who are better at a distance—or taken occasionally and in small doses."

"That's exactly what she is," said Ted, turning towards him with a look of surprise and admiration, "I've always felt that and never been able to express it. You mean, I suppose, that for you she is interesting to visit occasionally, and that to me, or any person she is really fond of, she is immensely kind and sweet so long as they keep away at a distance or only appear on occasional short visits. But to live with—"

"She would be very trying." said Merivale; "she

would disguise her affection as thoroughly as she would feel it."

"But women get on together, somehow," said Bowness.

The question which was present in the mind of both of them was, clearly, "How can Muriel stand it?" But it was noticeable that neither of them mentioned her name.

"How can Muriel stand it?" was a question many people often asked themselves. It was, as we have seen, the essence of Aunt Dorcas's manner towards her to be unmitigated. Unmitigated, indeed, Muriel had for a long time thought her. But as time went by and she grew more familiar with Aunt Dorcas's ways, her subtle feminine instinct revealed to her the fact that beneath the unswerving unkindness of her manner Aunt Dorcas had allowed a real affection to spring up. There was an occasional softness in her eye, which did greatly mitigate the biting quality of her contemptuous rebukes. There was an expression even of love sometimes to be surprised on her countenance—an expression Muriel had more than once caught there when she looked up suddenly from her work and found Aunt Dorcas gazing at her over her spectacles—an expression which, of course, immediately disappeared as soon as it was observed. It would seem, then, as if Muriel's gentle forbearance and

bright ways had found a soft spot in Aunt Dorcas's heart and her sympathetic humor enabled her to understand her. There was another thing that made it easier for Muriel to be generous towards her aunt and to bear with good-will the acrid humors of the old lady. She had learnt one day from Lady Solightly, to whom she had in a fit of depression confided her cross, that there was a tradition in the family of a cruel tragedy of the heart having befallen her. An agonizing disappointment, it was believed, had blighted the temper of the once gay, though never pretty, Miss Cantling.

"It may seem odd to you, my dear," added Lady Solightly, "but it is, I am told, an undoubted fact that your great-aunt *was* once gay. I know you will sympathize with her suffering and perhaps, now you know this, you will find it easier to bear with her moods."

And certainly, as that wise and charming lady foresaw, this knowledge had been a very potent aid to Muriel when more than her usual stock of patience was required to "stand it."

If in the course of a few years Muriel had gained the affections of Aunt Dorcas, it will hardly seem surprising that already, in a few short meetings, the sway of Muriel's mind and Muriel's charm had asserted itself once more over Merivale. If for the last half-dozen years he had not been faithful to his

love, if he had almost deliberately forgotten her image and by an effort of will driven from the corridors of his memory the ghost of the personality that had so long haunted them, yet it only required to see her once more in the flesh for him to be once more her slave.

After their first meeting on the first night of his arrival he had known it. He knew it more surely now, though he would not admit it, even to himself. He had acquired, somehow, an easy trick of refusing to face and argue to a finish facts that were unpleasing to him, so far as they concerned his conduct and future. He had his conscience now under such perfect control that he could put it to sleep with the lullaby of an oath. But no man becomes a saint in his sleep. By saying *Damn!* and by calling to his aid a certain effort of will, Merivale could shut off his thoughts from the consideration of the probable results of a given course of action on his own part with as brilliant a precision as he could, by another effort of will, bring his intellect to consider, to penetrate, and to foretell the causes and effects of a popular movement or a public policy.

The only facts he allowed himself to remember at present were that, for good or evil, Fortune had given him a chance to win an inexpensive seat in Parliament; that he was here to win it and that

there was no going back. Muriel was a charming girl, and her bright wit and original humor were mentally stimulating and refreshing to an extraordinary degree. And, as Ted's sister, mere manners compelled him to see her occasionally. He knew that, for the present at any rate, he had no right to marry. He was a poor man with a future and something of a past, perhaps, and therefore it was not for him to fall in love just now. So much he admitted and then dismissed the subject from any further analysis. What he refused to see was that Time was executing one of his inexorable revenges. How kind, and yet how cruel is the influence of Time! He dims for us our dearest memories and the pangs of our acutest sorrows. Even those sorrows that are dearer to us than any joy, the memory of which we would not exchange for all the pleasures of life, even they cannot resist the subtle, chemical effect of Time. And yet again, if we have struggled against some desire, or stifled our love for some one whom we must not love, or even if our love has grown cold, there comes with time a re-crudescence of that desire, and that love seems to take a fresh and firmer hold upon us.

So it was with Merivale, but he would not perceive the fact. He pretended that it was only out of politeness that he agreed to go to tea with—Aunt Dorcas.

It was five o'clock on Sunday afternoon, a critical moment in the week for many an English household. They must drink tea then or quarrel. The strain of religious observances and of a Sunday luncheon comes upon us then, and tea, social friend if it be not a cruel enemy, alone can preserve our Christian habit of mind. Sunday is the day of all days when tea should not be deferred. But Aunt Dorcas and Muriel sat waiting and waiting. And there was no sign as yet of their belated visitors.

The day had been hot and sultry. A slight thunderstorm in the morning had confirmed Aunt Dorcas in her statement that the air was "charged with electricity." It was still sultry. Clouds on the horizon betokened the possibility of another storm. The very bees seemed oppressed with the heavy heat as they droned lazily amid the honeysuckle; the purple Canterbury bells hung limp and dejected on their stems, and a hawk-moth that hovered about the blossoms in the window seemed to move with less than his usual quickness of flight. There were signs, too, in Aunt Dorcas's slightly vicious use of her knitting needles that another storm was brewing in the Dower House. The silence here, too, was oppressive. Muriel sat reading, in dread of the breaking of that storm. Presently Aunt Dorcas put down her knitting and carefully covered it with the *Guardian*.

"I do not see any harm in knitting on Sunday myself," she said to Muriel in a voice that challenged contradiction. "That is, if one has properly observed the Sabbath in other ways. But I hide it in order that the servants may not see. They might not understand, and it would be a bad example for them. I should not like to set a bad example for them. I should not like to set a bad example to the servants—"

"Certainly not," said Muriel.

Aunt Dorcas looked sourly at Muriel. Why did the girl look so beautiful this afternoon? She was wearing a dress of tucked mousseline-de-soie of a delicate peach-blossom shade, with a transparent yoke of old Mechlin lace. Ropes of pearls adorned her shapely throat.

"Why have you put on all that *finery* this afternoon?" asked Aunt Dorcas, meaningly. Muriel made no answer.

Aunt Dorcas looked at the clock and sighed.

"I don't think this new friend of yours is very polite," she said in an injured tone. "Here have we been sitting with the teapot in front of us for half an hour and there is no sign of him yet!"

"He's not a new friend," said Muriel, who was feeling rather cross herself; "and I really can't help it if he is late, can I? I expect they will be here in a minute."

"Old or new," returned Aunt Dorcas, decisively, "he ought to be punctual. I am never late for anything and I don't see why anybody else should be."

"Perhaps he has something to do," suggested Muriel.

"Something to do? Nonsense, it is all inconsiderateness or affectation, I'll be bound. Nobody is busier than I am. I never have a moment to spare, but I was brought up, properly I hope, to be punctual."

"Well, I said before that I wish you would n't wait for your tea. Do have it now."

"I shall do no such thing," said Aunt Dorcas, who was determined to be a martyr, "but if you don't mind I will play a little music. A little music might help you to recover your temper,—that is, of course, if you care to listen."

Muriel bit her lip and did not answer. Aunt Dorcas was really very trying this afternoon,—and so was everybody else! She took up the novel which lay on the table at her side and proceeded to read, while Aunt Dorcas, with great care and frequent pauses, but with a quite marvellous lack of expression, played Handel, dismally. She always played Handel on Sunday, because everything written by Handel must, she thought, be sacred; especially if the movements were marked *Religioso*.

Presently she stopped, and, twisting round on the music stool, looked at Muriel.

"What are you reading?"

"*Rudin.*"

"What's that?"

"A novel by Turgenev."

"Who is he? I never heard of him. One of these modern writers, I suppose. Really, I wonder how you can be so silly as to waste your time and wear out your eyesight with reading trashy novels. On Sunday too."

"Really, Aunt Dorcas," said Muriel in half-humorous exasperation, "my eyesight is not a carpet! And I can't understand why you think that everything written since you were born must be trash. Besides, Turgenev—"

But it was the strong point of Aunt Dorcas that she never allowed an argument.

"There are many things you cannot understand," she returned, quickly, "but please let us not discuss profane literature on the Sabbath. I do not approve of reading novels on Sunday, whatever the degenerate youth of the present day may do."

At that moment the wheels of the dog-cart were heard approaching and in a few minutes Ted Bowness and Arthur Merivale entered. They both apologized for their unpunctuality.

"Arthur nearly made me kill the mare coming," said Ted.

"I do so hate being unpunctual," said Arthur. "Unpunctuality is one of those unfortunate mistakes which cause great annoyance to those that commit them and seem intentional rudeness to those who suffer from them. At least that's so with me in both cases. But to-day it was, indeed, unavoidable. You know we were lunching with the ex-candidate—and we took more than an hour over luncheon."

"You know the sort of buck-feed he gives," Ted put in.

"Well, afterwards he gave us a great treat. Stomakoffsky, the great Russian pianist, is staying with him from Saturday to Monday. You know he's on tour in England this season? So after lunch he was good enough to sit down at the piano and, once there, he went on playing one thing after another—and, you'll understand, we could not get away."

"Could n't you stop him?" asked Aunt Dorcas.

"Dear Aunt, he is n't a German band," said Muriel.

"Nor an Italian organ-grinder," laughed Ted.

"No. I understood Mr. Merivale to say that he was a Russian," said Aunt Dorcas, without moving a muscle, "and I should have thought he could be

classed as an Itinerant Musician. I am told you can always tell them to move on."

"But he was taking a rest from Saturday to Monday," said Merivale, smiling at Muriel, "so we felt we ought to let him alone. But I am really dreadfully sorry to have made you wait tea for us."

The tea at this moment arrived and Aunt Dorcas settled down to the making of it.

"I am afraid there is a heavy storm brewing," said Ted, who was standing by the window, studying the signs of the weather. "I hope it won't catch us on the way back. It looks like thunder, too, and the mare hates a thunderstorm."

They sat round the tea-table and over the muffins and the teacups the conversation turned chiefly on the political situation.

"Everything is going swimmingly for us," Ted explained. "Now that old Dodge-my-eye is squared and Merivale has been adopted all round as our candidate (you know he has, don't you?), there's no reason for Jimmy to hold on any longer. He has been longing to resign for months. Says he is not up to the work and the strain of these long sessions they have now. Would have resigned the seat long ago if we'd had a suitable candidate before. Well, that being so, now we've got one, the sooner we rush Merivale in the better, I say. Especially as the Rads are not at all ready. We

shall leave them in the lurch badly, if we hurry up! I don't mind betting Merivale is an M. P. before the month is out."

" So soon as that ? " said Muriel.

" Sooner, perhaps. Just because we are ready, you see, and the other side is n't."

" I 'm looking forward to the election immensely," Muriel asserted.

" By Jove!" exclaimed Ted, turning round, " did you see that flash of lightning ? Pretty vivid, is n't it ? Arthur, my boy, we 're rather caught here ! "

The flash was followed by a heavy roll of thunder; then another and another flash succeeded; another and another peal of thunder broke over the house; there was a rush of cool air through the stillness and presently the rain began to fall with a heavy swish through the trees.

" Yes, I 'm afraid you are!" cried Muriel. " What a shame for it to lighten and rain like this to-day. On Sunday too—when it ought to be in church."

" It is very annoying," Aunt Dorcas commented. " I fear I shall not be able to attend the six-o'clock service. And I was not able to go this morning because of the rain. I always go to church in the afternoon if it rains in the morning," she explained to Merivale.

" And I in the morning if it rains in the afternoon," said Merivale, flippantly.

" It sounds a good plan," said Aunt Dorcas, demurely.

" Well, you must wait till the shower is over now," said Muriel. " There 's no sense in getting wet for nothing, and I 'm sure it would n't do to drive Black Bess through this storm."

" Yes, we 'd better wait," Ted assented.

" But what I was going to suggest," Muriel continued, " was, that you men would probably like to smoke. And if you don't mind coming into my boudoir, as I call it, you can smoke there."

" That 's very kind of you, Miss Bowness," said Arthur, " but you are sure you don't mind the taint of tobacco."

" Not at all. I should smoke myself if I dared. But Aunt Dorcas does n't like it at all."

She led the way into the little sitting-room strewn with books, which was her own peculiar den.

" I *have* sometimes smoked a cigarette myself," she confessed to Arthur, " up the chimney, of course. But Aunt Dorcas has such a sharp nose. I had to pretend the workmen or the chimney-sweep or somebody must have been here and left the smell of their smoky clothes. Very wrong to tell a story, I know. But I think it would kill her if she knew I had ever smoked a cig!"

Merivale had lit a cigarette while she was speaking and had been casting his eyes round the room in which this girl, who fascinated him and had charmed the world, lived and wrote. He laughed in an absent-minded fashion as she finished, and she saw him stride suddenly across the room.

"Good heavens! I forgot," she muttered, biting her lip.

He, meanwhile, had advanced to the lofty bookshelf that was fixed against the wall, and had taken down a small, much-fingered volume that had once been bound in fine white vellum. The vellum was yellow now with years, and the pages, he saw, as he looked rapidly into it, were pencilled and creased by some intensely assiduous reader.

He turned round quickly and held the book up for Muriel to see.

"My poems!" he cried in a tone that challenged her.

"Y-yes," she stammered nervously. For she dreaded that smile of triumph on his lips and that look of interrogation in his eye, the unuttered question so plainly demanding whether she understood what those poems had meant for him and who had inspired them.

A second—it seemed to her an eternity—elapsed in silence whilst with open lips and raised eyebrows Arthur Merivale stood opposite her, book in hand,

searching vainly for the complete answer to all the questions that surged in his brain and waiting to hear it from her.

It would have needed many, many words to make it all clear to him. But at the end of that silent second something in her manner, something in her silence seemed to have given him the answer he sought. For he moved towards her and from his lips, intensely uttered, came the word, "Muriel!"

Then the door of the boudoir opened and Ted strolled in, cigarette-case in hand.

"I've got away at last," he observed, whilst Arthur, who had slipped the book into his pocket, had turned round and was scanning the shelves once more—oh, so intently!

But the word was out between them, never to be recalled. That one little utterance of a Christian name, what has it not cost, what happiness and tears, what trouble and what joy has it not brought into the world, 'twixt man and maid!





CHAPTER VIII

THE OCCURRENCE OF THE INEVITABLE

IN common with many men of greater renown, Merivale had this quality,—in cases where his own efforts were concerned he was a man of much confidence and few confidences. It was, as one may suppose if one is charitably inclined, in virtue of this natural reticence about his own doings that he failed to inform Ted of every occasion that he visited the Dower House or saw Muriel during the next month. Perhaps he shrank from the monotony of such intelligence. Perhaps it was for the more subtle reason that he did not wish to acknowledge even to himself how often he saw her or to express aloud the excuses he framed for his own guidance to that house.

But, whatever the reason, certain it is that during the weeks that followed that Sunday of storms, Merivale gave to womankind many hours that were meant for his party. And yet a careful observer of his movements would have noted that it was not

until the Thursday following his second visit that he did go again to the Dower House. The three days that intervened were the period of a struggle. But it was the struggle of a man who knows that he is going to be beaten. He fought his ship with apparent manliness and cried aloud, in answer to the appeal of his heart, that he would never surrender. But he knew all the time that he would not go down fighting. He would strike his colors rather than drown.

But he fought, yes, and fought well, meanwhile. Only he knew that each engagement with the enemy brought him rapidly nearer to the final defeat. This girl, whom he had determined to dismiss as a danger against which he was forewarned and forearmed, as a risk he could certainly discount, was, he knew, inevitably his conqueror, the mistress of his heart and life, as surely as she had been in the days of their first happy youth. But he fought on still.

For on the occasion of their next meeting, on the Thursday after that eventful Sunday, he deliberately ignored the salient point of their last interview. He was riding home, after paying a fruitless call upon a neighboring landowner of some importance and queer views, whom it was important to cajole since it was impossible to convince. Merivale, on his way home, had to pass—in good faith,

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he was so obliged—the Dower House. And, as he passed, the sight of Muriel in the garden compelled him—it was the barest demand of civility—to stop and speak.

"I have been to call on Sir Graham Goring," he explained, "and of course he was out."

"What a nuisance!" Muriel replied. "Why is it that people are always out when you particularly want to see them, and always at home when you particularly don't?"

Aunt Dorcas, who was sitting in the garden close at hand, beneath the shade of her hooded chair, was ready with an answer:

"You may be sure it is because it is best so, Muriel," she replied.

"Really, Aunt Dorcas," cried Muriel, "what an optimist you are!"

Aunt Dorcas sat bolt upright and began to fan herself vigorously.

"To think that I should have lived all these years to be called that!" she said indignantly. "I don't know what you mean, child!"

"I believe," said Merivale, to create a diversion, "I believe the great principle of 'pure cussedness' accounts for all these things. And that principle of the contrariness of things is, I should n't be at all surprised to hear, the origin of the belief in a personal devil. The wretched savage finding him-

self eternally scored off, whatever he did, on every possible occasion, began to think that there must be somebody, some actual living, personal prince of evil directly waging war against him and all good and happiness. Yes, you may be sure that is the pedigree of the devil. He is simply the personification of the principle of pure cussedness."

"Oh, but I like to think of him as a little man with horns!" exclaimed Muriel. "But seriously," she continued, "I do hate this whittling away of all beliefs. What could be more unsatisfying than the creed of these modern metaphysicians who tell us, so far as I can understand, that what we have to look to hereafter is a kind of state of general consciousness, happily unconscious of self, because self is the root of all sin and evil? No, the prospect of a state of general consciousness is *not* inspiring, though perhaps it ought to be. And no one can be enthusiastic—certainly I can't—over their notion of heaven as a sort of nowhere—is n't it?—where there is nothing to enjoy and no one to enjoy it!"

"It does sound a little thin, does n't it?" Merivale assented. "But I must dismount, if I am to discuss theology."

"Don't you feel like an angel on horseback, then?" laughed Muriel. "But do put up your horse—I see Ted has lent you Captain, which I

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hope you know is a very great compliment from Ted—and come in to lunch with us."

Merivale, being mortal (he was always the first to acknowledge it), did as he was invited. But he studiously avoided any references to books—whether his or hers.

"How are you getting on with your future constituents?" Muriel inquired, when luncheon was served.

"Oh, all right, I think, thanks. But I shall owe it all to Ted if I do get in—"

"Of course," commented Aunt Dorcas.

"But as men I find them rather slow and narrow, even the best of them. In fact, I've been wondering how you manage to live here without vegetating. For you really are so very much alive, if I may say so, and you always seem in good spirits."

"Oh, that's a matter of health," said Muriel.

"And health is a matter of spirits?"

"Yes. The spirits you have—and don't take! But then, I could never be bored anywhere—or by anybody."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Merivale, with an intentional exaggeration of surprise.

"Yes. Muriel has a very nice disposition," said Aunt Dorcas.

"Don't say that," said Muriel, "it sounds as if

one were a horse—a nice young girl—warranted not to buck, or rear, or bite, don't you know."

Merivale laughed and then said hurriedly:

"But do you *really* mean that you are never bored? If so, I do indeed congratulate whilst I envy you. I am so often bored."

"It's quite true. I am far too modest to be bored."

Merivale smiled and bowed ironically.

"I'm afraid that's rather rude, after what you said, is n't it?" she apologized. "But what I mean is that when I am by myself I am always contented with my own thoughts, and when I am with anybody else I am interested in them, however dull they may be. If I'm not, I think it's my own fault for not being sufficiently broad-minded and sympathetic. At the worst I can find amusement in the most boring of bores and that means that I can disarm them of their boring qualities. Besides, I know that it amuses them to talk."

"Only one has to listen," said Merivale. "That is what I object to."

"You should be more charitable. One would not wish even bores to be deprived of all amusement."

"No, theoretically perhaps not. But one does not want to be the amusement of which they are not deprived, that's all," returned Merivale.

After luncheon Muriel proposed a game of lawn tennis. But Merivale prayed to be excused.

"I have no shoes, you see," he explained, "and I really must get home. There are some letters I must write for the evening post and I have also to think over some questions of policy before the meeting to-night."

"I am afraid, then," laughed Muriel, "you are the amusement of which I shall be deprived."

"No," said Merivale, seriously, "you are *not* a bore, as you wish to imply. I should like a game with you immensely. To prove my sincerity, may I come up to-morrow afternoon for one?"

"Do, please," said Muriel.

Next day, therefore, he came—next day and the next. Half-hours of conversation, hours of tennis he managed to snatch every day from the busy rush of his canvassing days, and from these interviews, which were strictly non-political, he seemed to derive an extraordinary energy for his work. His confidence increased and with it his eloquence. The party agents were delighted with his progress. They declared that he was sweeping all the dubious electors off their balance with the vehemence of his confident enthusiasm. The polling day was now drawing near. In one village or another he was speaking every day or every evening. The tide of his success was flowing. Every speech made him

more popular. He said the right thing wonderfully, and his election grew daily more assured. There were, of course, a certain number of difficult points on which he had to make up his mind and explain his views. But when he was in doubt or difficulty and was unable to arrive at a decision he fell into the habit of walking down to the Dower House. He did not always discuss with Muriel the question that had arisen, but he found that he drew from her companionship inspiration to a startling degree, and his mental activity and the confidence of his judgment, after spending an hour with her, were so stimulated that the questions seemed to answer themselves, and, almost without further thought or preparation, he used to appear on the platform in the evening and pour out in a torrent of rare eloquence the vigorous judgments of his mind.

Even in the midst of the exhausting labor of canvassing and the excitement of continual oratory he had found time to read the book which Muriel had lent him. Highly as he had esteemed her gifts before, the reading of *Sir Puddiepat's Daughter* showed him that he had underrated them. Her wayward humor he had counted on, and reckoned as an asset the charm of her ever-changing moods. But her quick, quaint manner of speech could not, he knew, be reproduced in her book. What, as a writer, had she to give instead? The question presented

itself before he opened the book and it made him feel a little nervous about beginning it. But, when he did begin, the question was soon answered, and answered in such a manner as he could hardly have dared to hope. For the beauty of her style, the exquisite poetry of her rich and rare imagination, and the deep but delicate insight into human nature which justified the gentle irony of her observations on life, these were qualities for which he had never given her credit and which came to him as a revelation as he read.

And now, when her mind had been thus in part revealed to him, he began to reverence her as one whose intellect was an explorer in a more exalted sphere than was his, whose thoughts were on a higher plane and blest with the communion of pure, ideal companions, and whose spirit breathed, in Wordsworth's phrase, "a nobler ether, a diviner air." Seeing her now in the light of the beautiful things she had written, he came to regard her presence as a source of inspiration and her companionship as a most precious privilege.

It was not that, as a rule, they talked either deeply or seriously, whether on practical or speculative subjects, but, as he once endeavored to explain, much to the bewilderment of Mrs. Bowness, it was the consciousness that she could and would, if you liked. Beneath the humorous turns of

thought and expression in which she so prettily indulged he knew there lay a foundation of noble aspirations and honest, fearless thought.

Certainly, whatever the explanation, contact with her did have the effect of striking sparks of brilliancy from his mind, sparks which set all his faculties ablaze and when the hour came for him to speak caused his eloquence to glow with a fervid enthusiasm and with the fires of reason. The stimulus was so marked that he naturally never omitted to avail himself of it when opportunity offered.

The intellectual exhilaration of her companionship became thus daily more necessary to him. It was only gradually that he became fully aware of the fact. He saw for the first time the full extent of his slavery one day when he was much worried with the prospect of a speech he had to make in the evening in a village where he knew he would have to explain his views on the "Local Veto" to an audience that was violently eager for that measure. After tea, he wandered down as usual to the Dower House, looking forward to the conversation with Muriel upon which he relied both to soothe and stimulate him. Muriel was out. The acuteness of his disappointment amazed him. Mentally he found himself so troubled that he could not think coolly or collectedly on his subject. His head was filled with a jumble of contradictory facts and

ideas which led to no conclusion. It was almost as if he had been suddenly deprived of a drug to which he was a slave. He walked aimlessly about the Park, and gradually wrought himself into a fever of excitement. His brain worked rapidly and more rapidly; ideas ran riot in his mind and his judgment no longer had control over them. He returned to Prancehurst just before dinner, and remarked nervously to Ted, as they ate their hasty meal before driving to the village at which he was to speak.

" Ted, I believe I shall break down to-night."

" Nonsense, not you," said Ted, heartily; " have some champagne ? "

" No, thanks very much. That might not be a very good preparation for getting into touch with a tee-total audience."

" I don't know what to say to these people," he broke out presently. " I wish I had not got to speak to-night."

" Don't worry," said Ted; " you 'll be all right once you are on your legs. I 've never known you to fail yet."

Merivale smiled.

" I suppose I am getting nervous about the result as the day draws so near," he said, apologetically; " you see, this venture is rather a plunge for me, pecuniarily."

" Nothing venture, nothing have," said Ted,

with his wonted cheeriness. " Besides, this is not a risky venture. It is an investment."

But, in spite of Ted's encouragements, Merivale, when he arrived at the meeting, was still nervous and uncertain in his mind. He felt ill at ease in the presence of the hecklers who awaited him, and for the first time he was conscious of a fear that he would be unable to get into touch with his audience. It is a fear that usually brings its own fulfilment.

To the extreme disappointment of his supporters, Merivale, when he rose to address the gathering that was already more than half predisposed to find fault with him and was ready to criticise very keenly his views and explanations, was cold, awkward, and stumbling. His usual fire, his usual geniality, his usual confidence had deserted him. He spoke as one not having authority and determination. He spoke as if in defence of a bad cause, and that feebly. He was interrupted first by one heckler and then by another, and, for one who had already established a reputation in the constituency for his ready, happy knack of repartee, his performance was deplorable. He stammered, failed in retort, and, growing momentarily more confused, answered one question with rash abruptness, found himself suddenly caught in the toils of a logical heckler, and was obliged to contradict himself openly on a point of serious concern to the electors of that district.

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It was a bad evening's work. Hot, flustered, and cross, he suffered from Ted's silent condemnation during the drive home.

"I've lost a hundred votes to-night," he said, grimly, as they drove up to Prancehurst.

"Yes," returned Ted, who knew when to be frank; "another performance like that and we shall lose the show. You must pull yourself together for a great effort to-morrow and recover all the lost ground. That's the moral. I can't allow you to give yourself away like that again to-morrow. But you'll be all right then, never fear. Get a good night's rest. You have to impress a Cabinet Minister to-morrow, as well as a village audience, remember."

That was true. It had been arranged that a popular Cabinet Minister was to run down and speak for Merivale the next day on the questions of national importance then before the electors. His aid would be very valuable to Merivale and his presence would also give him an opportunity of making his mark by report in the House even before he got there. It was an occasion not to be missed for a display of power, of popularity, and of the soundness as well as of the width and originality of his political views. But instead of coming to that meeting on the ever-growing wave of success which had floated him hitherto from triumph to

triumph among the electors, he would have to appear to-morrow with the record of his first failure in his mind and with the memory of his weakness, his ridiculous and damaging discomfiture, fresh before him and too many of his audience alike.

" Why had he broken down to-night ? " he asked himself; and said aloud, in response to the reply of his conscience, that it was absurd. It might be absurd, but for all that he knew it to be true. True, but absurd, indeed, that the lack of five minutes' conversation with a girl about the weather, or a novel, or a country cricket match, should have thrown him off his balance to such a degree that he had failed to speak and argue like a rational creature,—failed when failure might jeopardize his career! Absurd, but true, for the brain is a delicate instrument reflecting speedily the disturbances of our system, and the sensitive temperament of an orator is easily disturbed. True, for the girl was—Muriel !

So ran his thoughts. They led him to a humiliating conclusion. They proved to him, and perhaps now for the first time he began to realize the fact that he was a man who drew his strength from women and must rely on a woman for his inspiration. The success that intellectually was his birth-right he was fated to lose or secure, not by virtue of his own unaided exertions, but through the latent

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power and enthusiasm in him when and only when evoked by a woman's voice, a woman's look, a woman's love.

It was characteristic of him that he did not allow himself to consider, much less to admit this conclusion when it presented itself to him, as he lay awake that night pondering. It was not sufficiently flattering. Therefore, by an effort of will, he turned his thoughts to a pleasanter channel. He fell asleep enumerating and imagining the charms and fascinations of Muriel.

"I think I shall go down to the Dower House and see if your sister will play a game of tennis this morning," he said to Ted at breakfast the next day. "It would freshen me up a bit, I 'm sure."

"Yes, do," replied Ted. "I wish we had a court here, but you see——"

He pointed to the paddock in front of the house in which his young thoroughbred colts had been turned out.

"That 's where it ought to be and I can't spare that."

"Oh, I shall enjoy the walk," Merivale returned, and presently, after donning his flannels, he set off along the familiar path. But he did not play tennis. In his heart of hearts he knew that he was not going to play. The desire to see Muriel and to talk

with her, to confess his failure and be comforted, to discuss his coming ordeal, and from her to draw inspiration to face and triumph over it—this was the object with which he set out for the Dower House that lovely morning in August. He walked briskly, glorying in the bright sunshine, swinging his tennis racket to and fro, and switching off the head of a daisy here and there in the sheer exuberance of his spirits. Never for years had he felt so young and vigorous as now. He was filled with hope and determination again through the joyful prospect of—oh, the game of tennis would do him good! He wanted some exercise to brace him up after last night's failure, that was all! Curious, he reflected, how a bright, sunny day rejuvenates and restores. Curious, the sympathy of Nature with our needs. To-day of all days it was necessary for him to have a fine day, and sure enough, the grateful warmth of the sun was making his blood course through his veins, rousing his brain to activity and stirring his limbs to an unwonted sprightliness. There was gladness in the very grass and a fluttering music in the trees. And the other day that thunderstorm had been very timely, too, fraught with significance for him and—

Muriel waved her hand to him from the window of her boudoir, as, at that moment, he came in sight. She had taken her seat at her writing-desk

as usual after breakfast, with the intention of writing. But the paper lay still blank before her. It was the blotting paper that was covered with ink, with dabs from a refractory quill, and sketches of familiar faces. One face in particular was outlined there many times and had been as often impulsively erased. The pen at last had fallen from her fingers, and, chin in hand, she sat at her table gazing through the window, down the path which led to Prancehurst. And when she saw the man who occupied her thoughts approaching she waved her hand in welcome to hide even from herself her own confusion.

"How good of you to come!" she cried as he came up to the window. "I want a game of tennis badly."

"But I am afraid you are busy with your work."

"No, really. I can't work. I have n't an idea in my head. I was in a regular brown study when I caught sight of you—and a brown study with me is always an elegant euphemism for the inane contemplation of nothing. Do come in, and I will slip on my shoes and be ready in a second."

"Thanks, very much," said Merivale; "I should like to take my revenge to-day. I feel as if I could beat you at last this morning."

But they did not play tennis.

When they arrived at the court they found the

net had not been put up, and when Muriel wondered vaguely about the gardener, Merivale suggested that perhaps the absence of the net was an omen.

"It is really rather hot for tennis, when you come to think of it. What do you say to a stroll through the Park instead?"

And Muriel answered: "Certainly, if you prefer it." She was always curiously ready to obey the suggestions of that soft, flexible voice.

"I am really not sorry not to play," Merivale confessed, when they had put their racquets in the summer-house and wandered out of the garden, "for I want to talk to you"—he paused, then added in his deepest tones—"about politics."

"How are things going?" asked Muriel.

He shied suddenly at the idea of confessing his failure.

"But it is rather a shame to bore you with these matters. An election is not so exciting a thing as it used to be. Ink-shed and beer-shed have taken the place of the old-fashioned bloodshed—"

"And rotten-egg-shed," put in Muriel.

"Yes," Arthur asserted. "It is curious to read about the manners of even the last generation," he continued reflectively. "It is amazing to find how much and how quickly we have advanced in all the amenities of life. Fifty years ago, and still more a

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hundred years ago, society was infected with an almost inconceivable and quite unrelated rottenness. People in the ‘good old days’ were both gross and luxurious, vicious and brutal, to a happily forgotten degree.”

“ I suppose it is so,” Muriel assented; “ and yet, sentimentally, one often thinks one would like to have been born then—or in an even earlier age. I wonder when one ought, really, to be born ? ”

“ When to be born ? It *is* an important question, is n’t it ? ” Merivale took up the idea and played with it whimsically. “ One should be punctual and at the right moment even at one’s birth. Some people are never in time—late, others think, even for their own funeral. Yes, it is an extremely serious matter when we get ourselves born ! The foresight which they tell us it is so necessary to employ in even the smallest affairs of life should surely be exercised most of all in this. Of course you and I have chosen the best date. In that case the present generation has exhibited a prudence of which our ancestors at any rate cannot boast. Just think of the days in which we might have had to live ! ”

“ The heyday of the Athenian Empire must have had its points,” said Muriel.

“ Yes. You might have been born in Athens when Socrates was killed because he talked—but you would have missed Nietzsche ! When Aristo-

phanes held the boards as a comedian—before Bernard Shaw had written a play; when Sophocles' tragedies were tolerated, though there was no Duse to act them. Then the voice of the mob ruled in literature as in politics and the voice of the mob was swayed not by the Press, but by Pericles. It would never have done—especially for a woman."

"Perhaps there was a time in the Middle Ages?" Muriel suggested, for she enjoyed his irony.

"Life was not a pleasant thing in the Middle Ages. Mediævalism must be survived to be appreciated. Born in the Middle Ages and accused, however falsely, of any crime, you were tortured till, though innocent, you confessed your guilt; tortured with a fiendish ingenuity which met with the approval of even the greatest lawyers and with a skill which was born of long and patient practice on the part of the executioners."

"Certainly we have none of that now," said Muriel.

"Of course not. Nowadays we have changed all that. The law knows nothing of torture now; nothing of the slow, legal torture of a chancery suit or a criminal trial, nothing of the crude and brusque brutality of a public cross-examination! No. Accused to-day in England you have the glorious privilege of being tried by your peers—by twelve British shopkeepers who are usually too stupid to

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acquit you of a crime which you were too stupid to commit!"

Muriel laughed. "Try the seventeenth century," she cried.

"No. The present is safer, though less glorious, one is told. Think what one might have been if one had chosen to be born in the seventeenth century. I might on the one hand have been a Puritan, I might have been a regicide; or, on the other hand, I might have been a king (most people who believe in their pedigrees will tell you that they certainly would), and it was the fate of a king in those days in defence of Church and State to fall into the hands of Cromwell and to be offered up as the holocaust of direct taxation. Nowadays, of course, it is quite safe to be a king. Kings to-day have no duties, no work, no danger. We do not hate or hang kings in the nineteenth century—we only shoot occasionally at princes and presidents and stab an unoffending empress in the back. The Hampdens of this day are inglorious but not mute. They call themselves little Englanders and are protected by the police. Certainly one ought to be born in this generation. The only real danger that attends one is the chance of being a millionaire. But with tact and care that can usually be avoided. At least I, for one, seeing how great are the responsibilities, how small the rest, and how few the

pleasures of a 'financial magnate,' should certainly require to be—well, to be paid a very large sum before I became a millionaire!"

"One certainly ought to be careful, I can see that," returned Muriel. "But I don't quite like to think that all the men of old days were born out of due time."

"I don't think they all were," said Merivale. "Galileo, of course, from the point of view of his own personal comfort, chose his moment badly. Shelley, Lucan, Seneca, Malthus, and a thousand others were no wiser. But Shakespeare was not ill-advised. He seized the English tongue at its ripest moment,—though doubtless he would have been glad to live in a century when he might listen to the wonderful noises which a Swinburne makes with words. But if he had been writing to-day his admirers would quickly have ruined his reputation by hailing him as the 'English Maeterlinck.' In the eighteenth century his words would have been dismissed as 'low,' whilst if they had been composed in this generation, they would have been printed on paper so bad and ink so scientifically compounded that before the world was ready to appreciate them, they would have disappeared. And he would have found that all his quotations had already been used by somebody else by this time. No, Shakespeare was wise in every way. Joshua, too, showed commendable prudence. In

these days of military science some of his methods would prove sadly out of date and his reputation as a general would suffer from Continental criticism. On the other hand a Sheffield cutler born in the Stone Ages would have been a god among men. But on the whole the present is doubtless the time to choose. Thank heaven, at any rate, that we have been preserved from the 'Golden Age.' A diet of acorns does not appeal to me, and the 'noble savage' usually proves on closer acquaintance to be a treacherous ruffian with a stomach ache. I am no Romanticist. I do not sigh for the Augustan age with its meagre Roman breakfast of a biscuit and a fig, nor for the Elizabethan era when the Queen drank beer by the gallon at breakfast. I am glad to have been reserved for a better age when breakfast has been invented and cookery perfected. Not for me those crude days of barbarous preliminary effort — when according to the lovable Mrs. Grasse, you had first to catch your hare before you could cook it. Nowadays at least we can buy one at the poultorer's."

So he rattled on, revelling in the paradox with which Muriel had provided him and chasing his thoughts to and fro across the centuries. His intellectual fooling pleased Muriel, too. Looking up at him from under her long lashes, she exclaimed involuntarily:

"Your gymnastics *are* clever, this morning."

"Clever!" he repeated, almost indignantly, for the word reminded him of his lack of cleverness the night before. "Clever? Oh, you should have heard me last night!"

"Why? Were you so brilliant then?"

"Brilliant! No. I broke down utterly—yes, utterly!"

Her eyebrows puckered in concern.

"Not *really*?"

"Yes, really. I was heckled into silence and then contradicted myself. The whole business ended in ridiculous confusion."

"I *am* glad I was not there!" broke from her. She spoke with an earnest simplicity that betrayed her interest in him. He answered eagerly.

"Oh, but if you had been, it would not have occurred."

"I don't quite see why—" she began.

"It was just not seeing you there or before the meeting that upset, unnerved me. Oh, Muriel!" he burst out; "don't you see, don't you know that you are all the world to me? You are, you always have been all my life everything to me—my star, my guide, my love! Without you I am a reed shaken by the wind, a rudderless ship, a dead leaf tossed by the storm. With you I can, I *could* win my way. I am sure of it. Muriel! I want

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you to inspire me, to guide me: I want you to love."

His voice was deep with passion and the words for once tripped on his tongue, tumbling over one another with the vehemence of his emotion. Muriel walked on by his side in silence giving no sign, whether of pleasure or annoyance. All consciousness of the outer world had left her. She walked on mechanically, but her mind was in a delirium of ecstasy when she heard at last those words, in that voice, from the companion of her fond imagination. Men had proposed to her before—many men, for she was winsome and she was an heiress. Old friends and mere acquaintances also, young and old, had proposed to her, but they had left her cold, annoyed, or at the most merely troubled in spirit. For hitherto—and she was now as much thirty years of age as any girl can be reckoned in polite conversation—she had not known love. She yearned for love indeed in common with all girls of her kind, and had, we know, imagined love; her heart had developed, had opened like a flower that seeks the sun, ready to love, but love she had never known. She had only found his blurred image, his pale ghost in the sentiment of her fantasy. But now under the influence of Arthur's emotion and demands her heart was beginning to tremble with that infinite tenderness which comes to a woman

but once in her lifetime and to expand, in spite of her timidity, in the splendid fervor of self-abandonment. Oh, we men, with our selfish sentiments, we men with our cynical sayings, our coarse stories, and our contemptuous depreciation of woman's heart and woman's mind, how infinitely small do we appear when tried by the standard of the lightest woman's great passion!

They had approached in the course of their walk that part of the Park in which the cricket ground was railed off. Looking across it Arthur caught sight of the red-brick wall of the orchard. A flood of recollection came over him, remembrance of a scene not unlike the present which had been acted there once before. Fate had baffled him of his prize then. Muriel's silence filled him with fear lest he should be no more successful now. He flung out his hand in the direction of the orchard and began to plead again.

"Muriel, do you remember? Years ago you told me my fortune—there, in the old orchard. *Make* my fortune now. Give me yourself, your love. You do not know—you could not understand that I was going to ask for it then—then, when I was so cruelly interrupted by the news of my father's death. His death, my mother's illness, the state of our affairs made it impossible for me to think of marriage any longer. I had no right any

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more to ask you to try to love me. But I loved you all the same: I have always loved you. And without you I am nothing. Without you I have wasted my time, my talents. Without you, I have *done* nothing. But *with* you—oh, Muriel, my darling, give me yourself, your love, your inspiration, and with you, together we will storm the very citadels of fortune and of fame ! Muriel, can you, will you ? ”

She turned towards him and put her little hands in his outstretched palms. Her eyes were swimming with the waters of love and she answered with a sob and low cry of contentment:

“ Yes, Arthur, I can, I will. For I have loved you, too. But never till now did I know how much ! ”

And standing there at the edge of the coppice, beneath the shade of the old trees that had listened in their day to how many words of love before, they sealed their love with one long, passionate embrace, one long, sweet kiss.

Then, when the silence once more was broken, they began to tell each other of their loves and of their weary waiting, each for the other. Muriel’s eyelids flickered and her lips trembled in sympathy as Arthur spoke to her of his hopes and disappointments, of his past misery, his present happiness, and when he told her again and again of the place

she had always occupied in his thoughts. All his life, as he told the tale, seemed to have centred on her imagined presence, on her desired personality. Of her own life, she hinted, how true that was! Ah, she could understand! So, whilst he poured out to her the history of his soul, as, at that moment, it appeared to him, touching in his confession of love and hope and fear and disappointment every chord in the human gamut, the strings of her heart trembled in response to the music of his voice, the harmony of his experience. Her eyes grew wet with sympathy and the smile of her happiness shone through tears. And he, seeing them, kissed them away, and laughter, triumphant, usurped the room of tears.

The hour of sentiment was over. The spring of youth and happiness bubbled up within them. A mood of wild joy and gayety seized their hearts and their cheeks were flushed with irresponsible delight. The murmured song of love was on their lips, the sparkling merriment of life's carnival was in their eyes as, hand in hand, with lightly tripping feet they made their way to Prancehurst.

" You will come to the meeting to-night ? " Merivale begged as they approached the house, " and support me on the platform, won't you ? Your presence—that is enough. It will be the moment—the triumph of my life. You will ? "

"Can you ask?" she replied. "Every moment near you is so precious. And to hear you eloquent, to assist in your triumph—need you ask?"

"Thank you," he murmured, then added:

"But I wonder how it can be managed. We start at three to drive there, you know. I have to speak on the way at Southdown for a few minutes from the carriage, and we must, therefore, allow three hours en route. Then dinner at the inn, then speechifying in the town hall, and then drive home. Oh, no! It is too much for you, too much to ask you. Besides, your Aunt Dorcas——"

"I am coming," said Muriel; "I'll arrange it all with Ted."

And so she did. A messenger was despatched to the Dower House to say that Muriel was going to sleep at Prancehurst that night and would not be at home till the following morning after breakfast.

After luncheon—a meal at which there was a curious air of suppressed excitement, for which Ted's rather nervous interest in the forthcoming meeting afforded a legitimate excuse—time dragged slowly till the hour came to start. Merivale during the drive was silent. He refused to discuss any subject, political or otherwise, with Ted, and Ted grew more and more anxious, fearing lest his friend's silence and apparent indifference to political questions might portend another breakdown and another

exposure of indecision on points of vital interest. Muriel thought otherwise. She supposed that Arthur was thinking profoundly over important questions, preparing or recapitulating his speech. Both were wrong. Merivale was thinking of nothing. His mind was at rest, floating in a sea of happiness, preparing unconsciously, and with calm assurance, for a great effort, an amazing outburst of eloquence. Presently they arrived in silence at the village of Southdown, where Merivale was expected to make a short speech from the carriage. His spirits rose when he saw the crowd of electors who were waiting for him outside the Goat-and-Compasses. The carriage drew up amid loud cheers—for it had been noised abroad that this was that Merivale who, fifteen years ago, had been the hero of the historic bowling feat in Prancehurst Park. The village band struck up wheezily the tune of *See the Conquering Hero Comes*, and it was Cadaver himself, bent now and silver-haired, who came forward to make a short address of welcome to the new candidate. He made a flattering reference to his deeds in old days and said that the politics of such a player must in the nature of things be all right. For a toward man was a toward man, and an untoward an untoward. And he wound up his speech with a local reference to the trombone, whose absence, he explained, had weakened the band. But *he*, he inferred, was an

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untoward player, and an untoward politician to boot.

Merivale rose to reply. Standing up, hat in hand, in the carriage, he thanked Cadaver heartily for the welcome he had extended to him and the confidence he had expressed on behalf of all Southdown in his unworthy self. Well, he would n't speak for himself, but he was proud to have a supporter and a guarantor in his old friend, Ted Bowness. Here his speech was interrupted by a roar of cheering, which testified to the skilfulness of his use of Ted's popularity. Then, when silence was restored, he made a pleasant reference to the past prowess of Cadaver and the present success of the Southdown Cricket XI. He expressed a wise desire for the prosperity of hops and left it to be inferred that such prosperity was intimately connected with his being returned to Parliament, and then, not wishing to trouble the electors overmuch with politics, he wound up with a compliment to the village band. They had played a good tune, he said, and played it well. Let them see that they made it good and did, indeed, render him a conquering hero. (Loud cries of "Aye! that we will!") There were some, he added, who preferred to be in a minority and thought they were always right and everybody else wrong. He understood from his old friend Cadaver that the trombone was one of these. Well, the

band, he was sure, was well rid of him. They had played very well as it was, and he rather gathered that they got on better without him—for the trombone, he was told, was always out of tune. Amid shouts of rustic laughter and loud cheers he sat down. The groom sprang from the horses' heads and the party was driven off hastily, leaving a crowd of delighted electors to talk over the merits of the candidate and to repeat, to chuckle over, and explain again and again the sharp thing he had said about the trombone.

"That's all right, old fellow," remarked Ted approvingly; "that's just the sort of thing to win a country election."

Merivale smiled and relapsed again into silent contemplation of Muriel.

They arrived at the little town at which the great meeting was to be held that night, and, in spite of the attentions of the crowd, they managed to reach the inn in good time for the dinner which they had ordered. The Right Honorable Richard Partmann, the Cabinet Minister, had already arrived and they found him waiting for them in the hall, chatting affably with the bar-maid. He turned to greet them with a hearty laugh.

"That was rather good," he said, after the preliminary handshakes were over. "I have to get back to town to-night and was asking about the

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trains and ordering a cab. ‘When is the last train?’ I said. ‘10.43,’ she said, ‘but the 9.20 is a much better one. Are you going to the political meeting?’ she asked. I said I was. ‘Oh, well,’ she said, ‘I advise you to catch the 9.20. *You’ll have had quite enough of the speechifying by then, I can tell you.*’”

Mr. Partimann laughed again at this unintentional reflection on his own rhetorical powers. Then the whole party, together with a few representatives of local politics, adjourned to dine. As they only talked their dreary political “shop” throughout the dinner, we will, like the crowd of electors in the town hall, wait till they have done. Behold them emerge at last, primed with rhetoric and the landlord’s good roast beef; behold them drive amidst a wild hubbub of cheers and groans to the entrance of the hall, and there, escaping with difficulty from the good-will their supporters were so anxious to express, appear presently on the platform before the dense crowd. Ted Bowness, as chairman, proved his own popularity and introduced the Minister by a short, neat speech. The Minister had to wait whilst a round of cheers was given for Ted and then another for Mrs. Bowness and Muriel, who sat embarrassed, but sweetly smiling. At last, after a refractory voter had been ejected from the hall, Mr. Partimann was able to begin his oration. As an orator Mr. Partimann was ponderous but

popular. A Cabinet Minister with a soft heart for agriculture, his elephantine jokes and pompous platitudes were admirably adapted to overawe the intelligence of his audience. He inspired confidence, notoriously, by putting apprehension almost literally to sleep. The mere sight of his short and pompous person gave one a sense of well-being for which even the most discontented elector felt a momentary, wondering gratitude. But, as an orator, he had the defect of his quality. He was soporific. There was a feeling of somnolence, of repletion almost, in a room, whenever he finished a speech. He was, therefore, notoriously difficult to follow. To follow him successfully required in a public speaker a great elasticity of spirits which should enable him to recoil into a vivacious tone and rouse his listeners to a cheerful alertness.

Merivale, whose temperament as an orator was keenly sensitive to the influence of his surroundings, felt the depression of the assembly when the Minister sat down amidst a round of approving murmurs rather than of uproarious applause, and he was instantly aware of the necessity of galvanizing into excited enthusiasm the dulled perceptions of his supporters. He must stir the wits of his audience and then rouse their fighting instincts, then satisfy them, if he could, that it was on his side that they must fight.

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He began to speak, therefore, in low, quiet tones, in short, simple Anglo-Saxon words. Intentionally he made it necessary for the crowd beneath him to strain to catch his voice. He referred, after a few opening sentences, to an attack that had been made upon him in a local paper that day in connection with his failure the day before. He mentioned the name of his assailant, a man popular with his opponents. The first part of his reference to him was couched in complimentary terms. A cheer rose in the hall and counter-cheers, interrupting him. He held up his hand for silence, and, when he had obtained it, he finished his sentence with a sharp, unexpected jest that turned his assailant and his assault into good-humored ridicule. A roar of laughter filled the room and many a farmer turned to his neighbor and poked him in the ribs explaining the jest.

"Eh! that was a good one for he!" was the comment.

He had got his audience on good terms now, both with itself and him. He glanced hurriedly over his shoulder and saw Muriel leaning forward in her chair smiling, applauding, encouraging him. He drew vigor and confidence from that gracious sight. Speaking boldly and plainly he plunged into a discussion with regard to his statements of the previous evening. He explained his position in

clear terms. There was no beating about the bush to-night. Short, nervous Anglo-Saxon words made clear his downright policy. He spoke as a plain man conscious of holding a good, straightforward belief. The difficulties which had bred confusion before had vanished now, and his opponents' case was shattered by his calm and lucid declamation. Cheers and murmurs of approval rose again and again and showed him how completely he had regained whatever of confidence he might have forfeited. Then he passed on to the third section of his speech. He shifted the scene from the narrow arena of local squabbles and riveted the attention of his audience upon an ampler stage, on the boards of which the various actors in the great drama of our empire were then playing their entralling parts. He called the attention of an audience which was as yet almost completely ignorant of the matter to the cloud like a man's hand that was growing daily larger on the horizon of colonial affairs. In simple words, the simplicity of which only intensified the indignation which surged beneath, he set forth the history of past days and doings, the record of intolerable oppression and corruption in South Africa, which was at last forcing a long-suffering nation to accept the arbitrament of war. What war would mean he did not disguise. He did not minimize the waste and horror of it. He was one of the few,

also, who foresaw in some degree the magnitude of it in this case. He shrank from it, he declared, as the breakdown of diplomacy and a reversion to barbarism. But there were worse things than war, and it was a more offensive and intolerable form of barbarism when a narrow and corrupt oligarchy dragged the fair name of republicanism in the mud, and hid beneath the ægis of liberty their monstrous system of injustice and oppression.

Thus the tide of his eloquence rose and the torrent of his speech, borne on the rushing currents of knowledge and indignation, swept the imaginations of his listeners from the puddles of their village pump out into the great sea of their imperial responsibilities.

It was a brilliant piece of oratory. It was also sound and signified something. He sat down amidst a scene of indescribable enthusiasm. The stolid villagers screamed and cheered themselves hoarse, flinging up their hats and beating the air with their sticks in a delirium of uncontrollable excitement. And the Cabinet Minister, seeing in him the coming man, said with unwonted fervor as he congratulated him :

“ That was splendid. You said everything and not too much. You made every point and made them all perfectly. I congratulate you. We shall look forward to hearing you in the House. Good-bye and good luck. I must catch my train.”

"Good-bye," said Merivale, "and thanks for your help and compliments. But I fear I must have spoken longer than I knew, and your train, I know, you *must* catch."

"Well, I only have about ten minutes," returned the other, "but I would rather have missed it than a single word of your speech."

"You 've made a hit," said Ted, afterwards, when they were waiting by themselves for an opportunity to get to the carriage when the crowd should have melted away.

"A hit all round," said Muriel, whose flushed face and heaving bosom betrayed her excitement and her pride in his triumph. "You must congratulate him, Ted—and me. For Arthur has won his reputation; he 'll win the seat—and he has won ME!"

She pressed her brother's arm. He turned and kissed her. Then he burst out:

"Great Scott! I never had the ghost of a notion about it. But I 'm real glad. Congratters, old chap! I *am* glad."

Merivale shook his friend's hand in silence. Then, turning to Muriel, he whispered:

"Ah, if I could only be to you something of what you are to me! If I could help to inspire your work and give you strength, confidence, success as you give them to me! If I could only in

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any way help and share in the brilliant triumph of your books!"

" You can, you do. Oh, you always *have*," she whispered back in her happiness.

So closed for Arthur Merivale that day of great personal triumphs. It left him, however, not so completely joyful as Ted justly expected him to be. He refused to sit up and talk the whole thing over with Ted in the smoking-room. He said he was tired and felt the reaction from the excitement of the day. He went, therefore, straight to bed; almost, it would seem, in a fit of depression. For there was a frown on his brow and a dull dread at his heart which contrasted oddly with the natural joyousness his achievements should have brought him.

" Merivale," Monckton had said, " has a stake to play. He will have to play it very carefully."

The question apparently was, if the expression of a man's face goes for anything, had he been careful enough ?

For Muriel it had indeed been a day of great wonder and joy and triumph. When she went up to her room that evening at Prancehurst, she sat for a long time in her dressing-gown, thinking over it all. At last she picked up a sheet of notepaper, and in an ecstasy of delight scribbled these words:

" He said he admired my books, said that he en-

vied my triumph. But, oh! how worthless is every triumph in comparison with the gain of love! What prize is profitable unless we can share it, what joy is there in victory unless we can report it to our beloved?

"The writing of books has been a consolation to me and their success when it came gave me an intense but momentary joy. But the pleasure soon went out of it because I was alone. There was no one to sympathize, no one to care, except myself, whether I did well or ill in my art. Art for art's sake may be enough to guide greater, stronger artists than me. But art for love's sake—that I think is the true motto for such as I am.

'Two Paradises 't were in one,
To dwell in Paradise alone.'

Marvell wrote that. I wonder if he had ever known solitude,—the real solitude of the soul which has been mine? I fancy not. I did what I could to be sufficient unto myself and to keep in sympathy with those around me, and even the true companionship I needed I strove through the exercise of my imagination to supply. Pale, elusive shadow of the wonderful truth that fled from my grasp as I vainly stretched my hands towards it! Love I needed, love I craved for. Oh! Wonderful Reality! Love has come to me; my beloved has found me! He is mine and I am his!"



CHAPTER IX

THE VIEWS OF AUNT DORCAS

"**A**UNT Dorcas, I have news for you," cried Muriel, next morning, running up flushed and excited to her aunt and kissing her twice on the cheek as she sat in her garden chair by the porch knitting with the unceasing diligence of English spinsterhood.

"Then I am sure it 's bad," replied the old lady tartly, for she was annoyed at Muriel's unceremonious desertion of her the day before, especially as she attributed the cause to politics. "And I wish, my dear, you would be more dignified and restrained in your gestures. I do hate *gush!*!"

"No, it is not bad," replied Muriel, good-temperedly, though the light had died out of her face for a moment under the influence of this chilly reception. "It is not bad. In fact, I want you to congratulate me. I am going to be married."

"It is very selfish of you," said Aunt Dorcas, "but of course you never think of other people.

You never consider *me*. But I do not wish you ever to pretend to do so if it does not come natural to you. I like people to behave as they feel and I should not like you to be a hypocrite as—*as well*. Still I must say that to be deserted, to be thrown over at a moment's notice after all I have sacrificed for you and to be required suddenly to live alone in my old age, is hardly what I was entitled to expect and certainly very far from what others would have chosen for me. It is very selfish of you. But you never think of *me*!"

That was the way the news honestly struck her. For the conduct people condemn as selfish in others is usually that which is unpleasant to themselves. Muriel knew the charge to be cruelly unjust and she felt intensely mortified.

" You know that is not true," she said in a tone that betrayed her sharp resentment. " You were just the one person I *did* think of when he asked me——"

" Now please do not display temper. I shall be very sorry to lose you, of course." (It was the tenderest thing she had said to Muriel for a long time and it showed that she was a little ashamed of herself.) " But I am not a martyr. Oh, no! Not at all. It has always been most inconvenient for me living here—*most*. In fact, I should never have done it except out of a sense of the duty that I

owed to your poor father. Well, well! So you are going to be married, are you? I don't know if I ought to congratulate you. Marriage is a sad lottery. It is like ordering a shirt from a sample, as my mother used to say. It is impossible to tell whether the result will be a success or not."

"Oh, I'm *sure* it will," said Muriel.

"Well, now you must tell me who it is. I am sure I cannot imagine who could be so— Oh! I *hope* it is not that Mr. Merivale at any rate!"

"Yes; it is Arthur Merivale," said Muriel gently. She had never ceased to wince under the cruel asperity of Miss Cantling's tongue and to-day in her joyousness this ungenerous aspect cut her more cruelly than ever. Yet she was able to appreciate intellectually, and applaud almost, the cleverness with which the old lady managed to hurt her. "I thought you liked him," she added.

"I? Yes, I like him well enough. But I would n't marry him for worlds. Not I. And I am sure you are making a great mistake."

"But what do you see against him?"

"Oh, everything! In the first place, he smokes."

"But every man smokes nowadays."

"You mean I am old-fashioned to object to it? Well, perhaps I am. But I always have objected to it and always shall—even though my youngest brother smoked a great deal and used, I remember,

to make a perfect chimney of himself. I assure you he used to smoke nearly every evening. So you see I know what I am talking about. And I would never marry a man who smoked, *never!*"

" Why do you object to smoking ? "

" I think it is a nasty, dirty habit, and I think it is *wrong*. I am not sure that it is n't immoral."

" Oh, I don't think it can be that."

" Well, if we had been intended to smoke we should have been given chimneys in our heads ——"

" But, on the other hand, God would never have given mankind such a plant unless He meant it to be used. Or what do you suppose tobacco was intended for, if not to be smoked ? "

Aunt Dorcas dropped both hands with her knitting into her lap. She was silent for a moment, looking up at Muriel over the spectacles that were tilted half-way down her nose. Then she answered solemnly :

" I suppose, Muriel, *it was for botany !*"

" And what else do you object to in Mr. Merivale ? "

" What else ? Why, he is a poet, is n't he ? " sniffed Aunt Dorcas, picking up her knitting.

" Oh, well, he did write a volume of poems when he was a boy. But he only writes on politics now and I am sure he has a spark of genius for that——"

"Yes. A literary man playing at politics. I was afraid so. Dear me! How very unpromising. Most unsuitable match, I call it. Oh, I 've seen something of the world! I 've known cases, I assure you. I once knew a dear, good girl—her mother and I used to go to dancing classes together—who married a poet—no, he was n't a poet, but a very conceited young man who *thought* he was a poet because he wrote stupid nonsense about putting his face into the lush grass and that sort of thing, and called it prose-poetry. And whilst he made himself ridiculous in that fashion, instead of leading an honest life, he was petted and pampered and spoilt by all the young ladies within twenty miles, who used to come and walk barefoot with him in the woods—he called it the communing of their souls, which I daresay it was—I 'm not a poet; I have no patience with them. All I know is that it nearly broke poor dear Margaret's heart, who thought that she ought n't to be jealous, and was, while she sat at home and worked—*worked*, if you please, to support him! No. I don't approve of literary men or geniuses of any kind. I have known several, but they are not satisfactory to marry and I always hoped to be spared having one in the family." She paused, then added venomously: "Not to say *two*. However, of course you won't believe what I say, and nobody will pay attention to me, and so I had

better say no more about it. I only hope I may be wrong and that you will be very happy. But what you see in him, I really can't imagine. He has no manners, and nobody, I should think, could call him handsome!"

"Oh, indeed he is," cried Muriel.

"Handsome! Oh, of course I'm wrong. But still, how you can think that a smooth-faced boy without even a beard, let alone whiskers, is handsome, I don't know. We had a very different standard in my day, that's all!"

Muriel moved away. She saw that Aunt Dorcas had settled down to be thoroughly irritating and unkind, and she felt that she could not keep her temper forever under a battery of such violent sneers. But Aunt Dorcas called her back.

"Don't go," she said, "I want to look at you."

She did look at her long and searchingly. Muriel quailed at last under that keen, inquisitive gaze; quailed and dropped her eyes.

"You don't love him!" exclaimed Aunt Dorcas suddenly, in a tone of satisfied conviction. "You don't love him! If you did, there would be a longing look in your eyes!"

Muriel flushed a burning red.

"Oh, but I *do!*" she answered stoutly.

"Well, of course you'll have your own way, in this as in everything else. You'll marry him and

find out your mistake afterwards. You have n't got to ask *my* leave, of course."

" I should be sorry if you really disapproved, Aunt Dorcas."

Aunt Dorcas softened for an instant.

" Oh, I don't deny that it might have been worse," she said. " But there is one matter on which I feel I ought to speak. Marriage is a serious state, Muriel, and every good wife should enter it with a full sense of responsibility. It is a wife's duty to cleave unto her husband and to devote herself to him. The Bible says so. Besides, you are a woman now and it is time you put away childish things. I am sure you will see that for yourself and agree with me."

" I don't quite understand."

" I mean, of course, that now you are going to be married it is time for you to give up all your foolish writing and devote yourself to fulfilling the duties of a wedded wife. All this literary nonsense you must do away with, once and for all. You see that, I am sure."

Muriel smiled, and still smiling in an amused, contented, indulgent manner, she shook her head and said :

" No, Aunt Dorcas, I don't see that—nor would Arthur. He would n't marry me if I did. But there I see him coming up the drive! I will run in-

doors to receive him and bring him out to see you, shall I?"

Miss Cantling always told everybody that she prided herself on being open-minded. She did, in fact, remember that there always could be two opinions on every subject—her own and the wrong one. But this, she felt, was *too much*, even for her. That a man should marry a woman with the deliberate intention of encouraging her to scribble all the morning instead of attending to her household duties seemed to be downright lunacy.

"Well, I declare!" she at length found breath to exclaim, "what *are we coming to!*"

She went on knitting in silent consternation at the eccentricity of things.

The air was heavy with the scent of roses and with the heavy, somniferous odors of the giant magnolia which clambered over the cottage walls. The delicious warmth of the noonday sun struck through the covered chair in which Aunt Dorcas sat and stirred the humanity within her.

"Dear, *dear* Muriel," she said presently in tones that would have brought tears to Muriel's eyes if she could have heard them. For her voice was filled with a strange softness, hardly recognizable by one who was accustomed to her querulous bitterness of every day. Yet who knows what tenderness of spirit lay concealed beneath the harshness of her

usual sayings, or what warmth of love disguised by the coldness of her repulsive, bitter, defiant manner?

“ Darling child, I hope she will be very, very happy! ”

Merivale had been brilliantly right when he told Ted that Aunt Dorcas was one of those who are “ better at a distance or taken occasionally.” It would seem as if the mere presence of those she loved prevented her from displaying her love; as if the very sight of those who were for her all the world provoked the gall and bitterness of her spirit. To them especially was she rude, sarcastic, unkind in all she said. It was partly habit, no doubt, and partly irony and partly the irritable, intolerant criticism born of a lonely life, but it must have had its origin in a cruel experience of the heart.

A smile of quite wonderful sweetness had taken the place of her usually acrid expression. She stopped knitting and sat idly in the sunshine thinking. Presently her chin sank on her breast and she was almost asleep. Through the heavy foliage that festooned the window above her head came the sound of low voices speaking earnestly. The soft, thrilling voice of Arthur Merivale and the sweet, trembling tones of Muriel floated to her ears through the open window, and drowsily, without thought of eavesdropping, she listened.

“ Darling,” said Merivale, “ you must take back

your word. You must not marry me. You must not love me. I am not worthy of you—of your faithful heart, your beautiful mind. Indeed I am not."

"I am the best judge of that, Arthur, and I think you are—I know you will be."

"Oh, I will try, my darling. I will try. But a man's no saint; and the more he loves a girl like you the more he feels his vileness, his utter unworthiness. In you there is no spot or stain—in me how many!"

"I take you for what you are,—perhaps for what I think you are. But surely I should know you by this time. The memory of you, the love of you, as I can see now, have haunted my mind and directed my life for years. You have always been with me even in your absence. Your life has always been part of mine. Now it must be all mine! Oh, I have always been thinking of you and was with you in spirit—always—so much more than you knew. You were my hero always—the companion of my thoughts and my ideal friend. You may read my first book now as soon as you like and then you will see what you have been to me and what I have thought of you. For *you*, Arthur, are my hero!"

"Dearest, dearest Muriel. Oh, you will indeed be the perfect companion of my days, the complete friend, the dear sympathizer, the sweet comforter

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whom I have wanted all these years. Muriel! my darling! my love!"

Thus the lovers' duet, so old and yet ever new, ran on; the sweet song of love's young dream. But it filled Aunt Dorcas with bitterness as she heard it. The smile of content and charity faded from her lips and in its place came slowly the starved, greedy look of those who are an-hungered and see the bread of others which is beyond their reach. It was a look that opened the locked closet of her heart. And to Muriel, who at that moment came out of the house bringing Arthur with her to receive the congratulations of the old lady, that look did for a moment lay bare the heart whose bitter longing had been so jealously guarded by unkind sarcasms of the tongue.

Muriel saw the tears in Aunt Dorcas's eyes, she saw the twitching lips, the writhing of the wan cheeks. In the fulness of her sympathy, never for an instant resenting the bitter things that had been said to her so recently, she left Arthur and ran forward to her aunt.

"What is it?" she said. "Why are you crying, Aunt Dorcas? Was it anything I said? Oh, I am sorry if it was!"

At the sound of her voice Aunt Dorcas burst into tears. She buried her wrinkled little face in her skinny hands and sitting in her covered chair rocked

backwards and forwards, to and fro, sobbing, crying in the sunlight. And amid the torrent of her tears Muriel heard these words repeated again and again:

" Why has nobody ever loved me ? Why has no one ever spoken to me like that ? Why has love never come into *my* life ? Why has nobody ever loved me ? "

Muriel put her hand in loving sympathy on the old lady's shoulder.

" Dear Aunt Dorcas, don't say that," she said, gently. " I love you and so does Ted."

By degrees the old lady recovered herself. The sobs ceased and her hands felt feebly, uncertainly for her reticule, found it, and drew out a tiny handkerchief and applied it with uncertain dabs to her tear-laden eyes. Then she returned quite suddenly to her old jealous manner. With a touch of bitter defiance she looked up at Muriel and said:

" You are bright and pretty enough now, I dare say. But I was young and bright once, I assure you, though you won't believe me. Ah, you should have seen me dance with my castanets and go across the room on my toes, like the great danseuse. But of course you don't believe me. You think I was always as old and sour as I am now."

Muriel turned and ran back to Arthur.

" We won't trouble my aunt just now, if you

don't mind," she said, swallowing a sob that would rise in her throat.

"But I shall see you this afternoon at the great open-air meeting, of course? It is the last, you know, before the polling to-morrow."

"Of course I shall be there, wishing you well and sharing in your triumph," said Muriel, smiling in fond admiration. "And to-morrow too we shall all be working for you like slaves, you may be sure. This will have proved a *double* election for you, won't it?" she added, with a happy laugh.

And presently she was at the great meeting, supporting him, as it is termed, on the rough platform from which he addressed the monster open-air meeting held in the recreation ground of the chief town in the division.

It was a scene she never forgot. The vast black crowd beneath her, with its white covering of up-turned faces, its sudden, unaccountable movements and eddyings, its mighty roaring, its startling silences, its laughter, and its savage outcries—of this and the other details of her surroundings she was at first most uneasily conscious. Her heart beat tumultuously, for she experienced a sensation of helpless fear at the sight of the many-headed monster at her feet, and every moment her anxiety increased lest Arthur's nerve should fail as hers was certainly failing in the presence of this mob. But

that was only during the brief minutes which preceded Arthur's speech. As he came forward to address the electors, she put all selfish fear from her. The terrific outburst of cheers and groans which greeted him compelled him to wait for many seconds before he could hope to make himself heard. He waved his hand and bowed and smiled. Then, seeing he must wait still longer, he half turned round towards the corner where Muriel was sitting and looked at her, as if for encouragement. Not for her to fail him now. Not for her to let him see the nervousness and the anxiety with which her own heart was fluttering. She nodded to him and threw into the smile she gave him all the hope and confidence he looked for. At the sight of that smile the smouldering fire of his oratory seemed to leap into flame. He flung round and faced the noisy crowd full square. With an imperious gesture he demanded and obtained immediate silence. His tall, athletic figure seemed to swell with the majesty of his inspiration, and the first modulations of his wonderful voice were rich with a rare music as he spoke.

Muriel, as she listened, watched the crowd grow still and attentive under the spell of his speech. The eddying movements in it ceased, and, as if by magic, a quiet unity took the place of turbulent confusion. Far away, on the edge of the multitude,

she caught sight of a tall, smartly dressed lady in a gay hat of red roses, struggling to make her way through the serried ranks, and for a moment her attention wandered from Arthur whilst she wondered how she could help her to get nearer, or whether it would be possible to have her brought round to the husting on which they were sitting. Another glance at the dense mass of people on every side of them showed how impossible that would be, and she dismissed the idea from her mind, with the reflection that patience and a shawl pin were what she would need to make her way through the crowd. Then she listened once more to Arthur, and in a second she was enthralled. All sense of time, all recollection of place, all consciousness of her neighbors was gone. She sat gazing at the speaker, rapt in ecstacy at the musical flow of his words and the stirring, thrilling vehemence of his oratory. Her lips were parted. Her hands lay folded in her lap, and there, without knowing it, they clenched and unclenched under the nervous strain of the exquisite pleasure his eloquence was giving her. Her eyes were fixed on his face, and as he passed from earnest appeal to vehement vindication of right, from rebuke to exhortation, and from exhortation to comforting promises of reward, she quivered in response. She watched attentively the light of humor, the flash of sarcasm, or the

cloud of indignation play upon his face and saw every phase of feeling mirrored in his clear-cut features as surely as it was expressed by his marvellous manipulation of words. It was a moment of triumph, indeed, of intoxicating, delirious triumph for him, triumph of a more beautiful, unselfish sort for her who loved him.

And all the time that he was speaking, steadily, persistently, untiringly, that lady in the hat of red roses was making her way through the unyielding crowd, forcing a path for herself indefatigably in spite of unyielding elbows and protesting murmurs, nearer and nearer to the hustings. Very anxious she must have been to hear the eloquent candidate.

But Muriel saw her not. She had no eyes, now, save for Arthur. Of the crowd itself she was no longer conscious and she had forgotten even the presence of those who sat next her on the platform. Arthur only could she see, and she heard him only.

Meanwhile the vast mass of responsive electors out there on the lawn swayed beneath his eloquence, like a field of corn rippling beneath the light zephyrs. Noisy at first they fell into silence, grew subdued, ashamed of bygone errors, passed from shame to resentment and from resentment to good humor, laughed again and rose buoyant on the wave of rhetorical assurance, confident in the

prowess and power of this one man, who alone, it seemed to them, could adequately represent their meaning, give utterance to their protests, and alone put into words for them their vague, half-formed aspirations.

Moment of triumph indeed, unrivalled in its sweetness among the emotions of man, when he first tames, then leads, and then, still leading, rouses a gathering of fellow-creatures by the mere magic of his eloquence.

The golden minutes of Muriel's rapture slipped by and Arthur's speech was drawing to its close.

He paused impressively. You might think that he was drinking in with an almost sensual enjoyment, through those quivering, dilated nostrils, the breeze of popular applause that floated round him. He paused. Then speaking in a more subdued style he began to take up the threads of his speech. He arranged the conclusions of each separate argument to which his audience, by their silence or their vociferous applause, had assented. It was his object to deduce from them the final conclusion expressed and amplified in the magnificent peroration which lay, happily prepared, in his pocket.

Muriel, at this juncture, looked hastily once more at the audience to gauge the effect of his speech. And she saw that eager partisan of his, in the gay hat with red roses, hot and dishevelled now, but

undaunted, still slowly and determinedly pushing her way nearer and nearer to the platform, through the surly, unyielding throng.

A hush came over the swaying, throbbing audience. Men stood on tiptoe, craning forward their eager strained faces in order that they might not miss one word, one note of the silver-tongued orator. Muriel, flushed, with her teeth on her nether lip, could hardly breathe for the intensity of her absorption. But when for a second she did glance at the audience she noticed that the hat of roses was steadily making its advance.

"These, then, friends and electors, are my convictions, at which I have arrived not without long years of patient study and honest thought; not, believe me, without dust and toil. These are also your convictions, your conclusions, which, by your assent to -day, you have pledged yourselves to uphold, to maintain, through years of triumph or distress, yes, through nights of darkness, if need be, as well as through the days of joy. And not least must you, will you, uphold and confirm them tomorrow by recording your vote at the polls for the candidate who truly represents you and who will always endeavor to stand by those who have stood by him." Cheers interrupted him. Then he began again in low, impressive tones. "This is not a mere local affair. England is looking for your

message in this matter. You must speak with no uncertain voice and prove—prove——”

He had entered on the first phrases of that stirring peroration up to which he had been so carefully and successfully leading. But it was fated never to be spoken. For he stumbled at this word—repeated it—then repeated the whole sentence almost mechanically. And meanwhile a ghastly change had come over his face. In place of that confident, virile triumph appeared first an expression of incredible amazement, then over his ashen features spread a horrid, unearthly fear.

Nearer and nearer that gayly dressed lady had approached; nearer and nearer through the tightly packed crowd, which had made way for her, preferring to yield to her pressure rather than to protest and thereby miss the words of the speaker. But as she drew close to the platform the crowd was denser and less ready therefore to give way before her. First one cry, then another, was raised of “Keep still!” One man elbowed another in his endeavor to make room for that gay, persistent lady to pass. The elbowed man retorted. There was a shifting and a scuffling; the jostling and the hubbub of angry men began to be heard. It was this that drew the attention of the orator at last to the individuals who were causing the slight disturbance. Up to that time he had been conscious of the crowd

in the mass only; he had been swaying it and had been in touch with it as with one composite creature, but without distinguishing its component parts. Now at last his eye was attracted to the spot where, full of roses, the bright hat of the disturbing lady was the most striking detail. He looked, and, as he looked, the words died away on his lips and the expression of horror came over his face. Stammering helplessly, he repeated his words, whilst with an involuntary gesture he flung out his right hand as if to guard himself from a blow.

His supporters on the platform, thinking he was ill, half rose from their chairs as if to lend him their aid, should he fall. But Ted Bowness, who had observed that somehow it was the very slight disturbance in the crowd that had upset his friend, rose as chairman and cried, "Order, order!" to the mob.

At the sound of Ted's voice Arthur Merivale seemed to recover himself. He stretched out both hands and catching up the word on which he stumbled—

"Prove," he cried with all the power of his lungs, "in spite of any little disturbance of that kind, what our feelings really are by singing as with one voice the great watchword of our land, *Rule Britannia!*"

The manœuvre saved the situation. Only those

on the platform and very few of the audience remembered the break in the peroration and noticed that during the singing of *Rule Britannia* and the national anthem, Arthur Merivale had disappeared from the scene.

" It was nothing, absolutely nothing except a slight passing attack of faintness—giddiness," he exclaimed, as they drove away amid the cheers, clamor, and confusion of the vast crowd, which was already breaking up. " I must have been intoxicated by the exuberance of my own verbosity," he laughed. And seeing that he did not wish to have the matter referred to seriously nobody said any more about it.

Next day Arthur Merivale was elected by a huge majority, and, after thanking his constituents, he returned immediately to town. There, when he had taken his seat in the House, he waited impatiently till Muriel, at the end of the week, came to London to stay with her aunt, Lady Solightly. In the meantime he did a thing which astonished the political world. Silence is the golden rule for the new member of the House of Commons; silence and hard work in committee rooms and secretaryships, till you have learnt the rules and style and temper of the House and established, silently, your claim to be heard. But before Muriel arrived in town Merivale had made a speech, a brilliant,

weighty speech in defence of the Government at a very critical period in its history, which was read throughout the length and breadth of the country, and which, by its charm of delivery and its amazing knowledge and skill, was admitted in the House to have done more to save the Ministry than their own official defence.





CHAPTER X

WHAT THE WORLD SAID

THE world, doubtless, is too much with us, but, accepting the inevitable meekly, there is much to be learnt from it. For the comments of the few hundred people who form our world, whoever we may be, are often amusing and usually instructive.

The little political world of London into which Merivale had so suddenly plunged, creating for the nonce an almost disconcerting splash, was paying him its highest compliment by talking about him. Of praise, scandal, and depreciation he was reaping his full share. His brilliant first appearance on the public arena and his brilliant engagement made his for the moment a name worth gossiping about. Prophets were busy gauging his prospects; detractors, who were jealous or ignorant of him, were excusing their ignorance or gratifying their jealousy by not believing in him.

Merivale, therefore, and Muriel were the central

figures at Lady Solightly's reception a week later. It was about them—about Muriel's achievements and the future of Merivale and the reason of their engagement—that tongues were wagging that night, although the leader of the House was present and a prima donna was expected.

The long line of waiting carriages and the persistent tinkle of arriving hansoms proclaimed to the outside world the popularity of Lady Solightly, and the laughter and babblement within made glad the heart of the most successful political hostess in London. And through the discords and harmonies of much conversation a phonograph would have recorded one recurring note that night. It was to the marriage of Merivale that people were continually referring. This was the *motif* of that evening symphony. Let us play the eavesdropper there for a while and learn what the world was saying.

"Let me congratulate you," said Monckton, for he was there, playing the jackal to his friend the lion, scenting promotion afar off. And Merivale replied:

"Thanks very much. I am indeed to be congratulated. When are you going to follow my example?"

"I? Oh, I am a poor man. So I don't fall in love. I want to avoid being scored off, as far as possible."

" Well, if falling in love leads to being scored off, I am afraid my analysis does n't read at all well."

" Is Monckton declaiming against marriage as usual ? " asked Ted Bowness, who came up at that moment. " Take care he does n't seduce you from your allegiance, Arthur."

" Allegiance ? " echoed Merivale. " I am a slave."

" Yes, that 's true," Monckton remarked, " and you 'll be more so, soon. No man on earth is a greater slave than a married man—except a man who is more married."

Merivale looked up quickly at the speaker and found that he was watching him narrowly. He looked round to see if there was any one near at hand to greet. There was no one. He broke into rapid compliment of Ted's aunt.

" If," he said, " I were a scribe, which I thank my stars I am not, I should like to write an article on ' Hostesses in the Country and Hostesses in Town.' "

" Why ? " said Monckton.

" Just to expose the excellence of Lady So-lightly."

" You should never expose the excellence of a lady," said Monckton. " But whisper it to me. I am so unobservant I should never notice it for myself."

" Simply that whereas there are thousands of people who in the country make you feel at home in their houses, in London I only know, well, say half a dozen people who distantly approach Lady Solightly in that way. It is difficult to express what I mean."

" Not at all," said Monckton. Then he added sweetly: " What *do* you mean ? "

" Here you feel it is because your hostess wanted to see you that you are asked; in other houses you feel it is because she ought to ask you. A desire to get you done or to get you shown is what spoils the impression of festivities in the season."

" In the season festivities are out of season. That 's what it is," said Monckton. He had been waiting impatiently whilst Merivale spoke, his lips quivering the while with eagerness to say his own say. Monologue varied by an occasional interjection from his victim was his idea of pleasant conversation. Now he hurriedly ran on fearing an interruption.

" Oh, you 're quite right. The world is altogether out of joint."

" What ?" exclaimed Ted Bowness, " are you going to play Hamlet now ? Have you turned reformer too, or something boring of that kind ? "

" Hardly. I am not quite such a rascal. Still, there *are* things that want altering, you know."

"Yes, the War Office, for instance," Ted Bowness suggested.

"Certainly," Monckton agreed. "But chiefly I was thinking that what requires altering is the way everything comes too late in this life, especially to the man who waits. We spend our lives grubbing for fame or toiling for money. And when at last we wake and find ourselves famous the doctor is usually in attendance, or when at last we have got riches and might enjoy ourselves we find that we have lost the faculty of enjoyment. That is why the Continent is crowded with those most melancholy of God's creatures—successful business men. All that requires to be changed. One ought to be made rich and famous when one is young and then, as one grows old, drop into the poverty-stricken obscurity of the average young bachelor. One ought to be able to retire with a fortune at eighteen on the understanding that one will have to be a junior clerk at eighty."

"That's not at all a bad idea," Merivale agreed, as Monckton smiled and moved away. His object, with regard to Merivale, was to keep himself before the latter's eyes as a clever young man in want of a secretaryship. At the same time, he was not yet sufficiently convinced that Merivale was going to be a success to permit him to speak in terms of enthusiasm about him. He guarded himself, there-

fore, by favoring his friend so far as to exercise on his behalf his undoubted gift for scandal. For Monckton was far too circumspect a youth even to talk scandal about people of no possible importance. As he left Merivale he caught sight of a young man, whose smooth face and straight hair, parted in the middle, recalled the style of an American dude. It was the penniless young Duke of Muddington, who had lately returned from an unsuccessful raid on American heiresses, and whose skilful bankruptcy had just shown his creditors that he was not nearly so foolish as he had induced them to believe.

"Hallo!" said Monckton, "I did n't expect to see you here."

"No. I could n't help myself though. I 've been dining with the Carters and had to come on with 'em here, as we 're going to a couple of balls together afterwards, you see. What sort of a show is this, anyhow? There seem to be a lot of political people nosing around."

The Duke was proud of his American, a language which he had studied carefully and which he fancied that he spoke without an accent.

"Oh, it 's a sort of function in honor of Merivale, you know," returned Monckton.

"Merivale, is it? He 's quite a celebrity all of a sudden. I guess I 'd like to know how a chap like him gets on."

" I suppose he understands how to get talked about and how to give an impression that he is wise and reliable, that 's all."

" And how does he get talked about ? "

" It 's easily done. All you have to do is to make so many enemies and so continually prick them with a blatant air of superiority that they all go about saying that you are a noodle and a nin-compoop."

" That 's very true," observed the Duke of Muddington, rubbing his chin and looking closely at Monckton, who continued unblushingly :

" If you can keep enough people sufficiently irritated to abuse you unceasingly, and enough people sufficiently curious to talk perpetual scandal about you—that 's all you want. Then you *are* a celebrity."

" You ought to write a book on celebrities and the way to become one."

" That 's a brilliant idea of yours. What shall the title be ? Would the ' Ladder of Fame. By the First Rung ' do ? Or ' How to be famous though foolish ' ? But I leave *that* to you."

" And what 's the matter with Merivale, anyhow ? " asked the Duke.

" Oh, he 's all right. He 's going to marry Lady Solightly's niece. And this is a function in honor of his engagement and his political début, I believe."

" So that is true, is it ? But who is she ? I heard she was a country girl and that Merivale picked her up when he was fishing in the autumn. Lady Solightly has kept her very dark."

" No, that 's not right. She 's an innocent authoress. Quite an *ingénue*, I should imagine."

" She must be," returned the Duke with emphasis; " but what about the girl in Paris ? I always heard that Merivale was devoted to her. Not that I 've seen him since we were up at the House together."

" The Paris girl ?" Monckton repeated. " Oh, I suppose she has been settled in the usual way. Merivale is far too ambitious to wreck himself for a woman. After that big speech of his in the House —they say it saved the Government, you know—he is sure of success, if he puts a stop to that sort of thing. But of course she may prove a nuisance. One ought n't really to do these things, or, at least, one should do them as little as possible. One always has to pay for them in the end."

" Yes, women are a very much overrated amusement, and what woman is worth paying for ?"

" But I am not in favor of *free* love. I suppose women are a necessary evil, but to wreck your political career for one would be more than absurd, it would be—what 's the word ?"

" Chivalrous ? "

"Yes. And chivalry is out of date. People don't do those things now."

"Have you seen the Bowness girl? That, after all, is the last question, and the first when you are talking of women. It is not women, but a woman,—the woman who counts and costs. I guess I've learnt that."

"True. No, I have n't seen her—at least not for years. They say she has a good figure."

"Still I should have thought Merivale was a fool to get married just now—unless he is obliged."

"She has money and he has n't."

"Then the girl must be a fool. Any girl is who lets a man marry her for her money."

"Well, Miss Bowness is n't a fool. I expect she understands well enough that Merivale could n't get her money any other way. Merivale is n't a fool either—at least not so much a fool as a politician. And the politician has to be careful of his diet. Wild oats don't agree with him. Besides Merivale less than any of them can afford to run risks. He has already published a book of poems. The British public don't like that. They distrust poets."

"The B. P. is an ass—and a snob and a hypocrite into the bargain."

"I should hardly say hypocrite. We English are so anxious for our neighbors to be immaculate that

we have no time to be so ourselves. That's what it is."

"A distinction without a difference, I guess. But I don't believe Merivale ever wrote poetry."

"I only said that he once published a volume of poems. But there's our hostess. She'll tell us."

"I wonder why Lady Solightly has taken to wearing those abominable lorgnettes. I never knew that she was shortsighted."

"No, she is n't. But I expect they help her to see what she hears. She's a dear person, but she never was very bright, you know."

"Who is that with her, do you know?"

"Mrs. Johns. They say she is madly jealous about this match. She had meant to marry Merivale herself. She marked him for her own ten days ago. She always does mark rising politicians for her own and then falls desperately in love with them. But of course she is much too old for him. She'll have to be contented with a Liberal in the end."

When introductions and greetings were over Monckton appealed to his hostess:

"Is n't it true that Merivale once published a volume of verse?"

"Yes," she replied discreetly, "but he has got over all that sort of thing long ago."

"Of course," Mrs. Johns broke in, like the

clever, spiteful, pretty little rattlepate she was, " of course, he has. He 's going to be married. Poetry ? Really ? I never knew that. But perhaps if he keeps steadily to politics now he will be able to live it down. Still, are n't you a little *anxious*, Fanny, for your niece ? Poets are very unreliable, are n't they ? I mean, you know, they are rather—rather *queer* usually. Of course, I don't know. We never had any in *our* family. But they look *queer*. One sees them at *At Homes*, occasionally."

"What is a poet, Mrs. Johns ?" asked Monckton.

" Is n't he a sort of man who sits about in woods or at railway stations (I saw one at a railway station once, I remember) searching for rhymes and growing his hair and never learning how to dress or where to be or how to behave ? He is usually locked up in the end, I believe."

" But there must be some difference between the good poets and the bad ones," observed the Duke of Muddington.

" Yes," said Lady Solightly, " the good ones find the rhymes and the bad ones don't."

" Ah, that must be it," Mrs. Johns assented. " Did Mr. Merivale find them ? But here he is. We were just talking of your dear poems, Mr. Merivale. So sweetly *pretty* we all think them. How odd it must feel to feel like that—like a poet, I mean."

Merivale bowed gravely.

" I 'm not a poet now," he said; " I tried to be once, but that 's all over. The fact is when I was at Oxford I registered a vow that I would be either a great poet or a great politician."

" Really ? " said Mrs. Johns with an air of innocent surprise. " How strange. I thought people who did that sort of thing only existed in biographies."

" Well, I failed to be a great poet. That was ten years ago."

" Ah, well," said Mrs. Johns, in the tone of one who accepts an excuse graciously. " You were ten years younger then."

" And how few of us," Merivale retorted sweetly, " are any older now."

She looked angrily at him, but the Duke of Muddington helped him out by saying:

" Oh, don't bother about ages. We 're all growing younger, all the time."

" Yes," said Merivale, " that 's true. Even five years ago I was very, very old. But I have been much younger since. Old age, after all, is a habit one grows out of."

As he spoke he turned away to greet a passing friend and acknowledge her congratulations. The little knot of talkers broke up and Mrs. Johns was left to talk scandal with Monckton.

" I wonder," she remarked pensively, " why Mr. Merivale is going to marry."

" They say," returned Monckton, " that marriage is the refuge of the inconstant."

" Then he, surely, does n't need it. At least I have been told that he has been very constant for the last four or five years——"

" To the Other Woman ? "

Mrs. Johns raised her eyebrows and gave Monckton an innocent stare.

" I am afraid you are talking scandal," she said reproachfully.

" I always do," Monckton replied unblushingly.

But Mrs. Johns moved away from him and approached the Duke of Muddington, who was sitting close at hand on a sofa, vainly endeavoring to stifle a yawn.

" Everybody is talking about Miss Bowness to-night," he said. " So I guess I must. What do *you* think of her ? Do you know her at all ? "

" I have only just seen her," replied Mrs. Johns, and managed somehow to suggest by the inflection of her voice that she did not wish to be uncharitable —first impressions are so deceptive.

" Of course she 's awfully clever and all that—but is she pretty, I mean ? "

" Pretty ? " Mrs. Johns repeated, deliberately. " Well, no. Not exactly what you would call

pretty. But I believe she is very kind-hearted and all that sort of thing."

" And good-natured ? "

" Yes, and well-meaning — and — and — *worthy*, don't you know."

" Lord ! " said his Grace, " I did n't know she was as bad as that. In fact, I thought she was rather the Greek goddess type. At least somebody said she had classical features."

" Oh, she can hardly be as old as that," Mrs. Johns spoke up in her defence, " though I believe she is not so young as she might be, poor thing."

" Well, I 'm certain I heard some one say she had classical features," he persisted.

" Perhaps they meant her books had. Not that they seem to me to be very remarkable."

" Monckton said she had a good figure at any rate," he continued, obstinate in her defence because he had no interest in the matter.

" That 's absurd," Mrs. Johns replied with some heat. " She has got about as much figure as a hose-pipe, or—or——"

" Or an angle-worm ? "

" Yes, just. No, one can't really pretend that the poor dear has a good figure."

A shade of alarm passed over the young man's features.

" Let us move away," he said in an undertone.

" I see that awful old bore the Dean of Catchester coming our way."

" Oh, yes. Let 's go—go. He duns one so dreadfully, does n't he ? He always wants a subscription to a soup-kitchen or an organ or something, and all the time you are talking you can see him waiting for an opening".

" Most offensive, I call it. Now if I were to go about asking strangers for subscriptions to my House for Decayed Omnibuses——"

" Or I for my Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Automobiles——"

" Or I for my organ, people would simply laugh."

" They would indeed. But *we* have to subscribe. I should n't mind so much myself if he did n't always talk to one in his bed-side manner."

" Does he ? Well, ' all coons look alike to me,' " observed the Duke as they reached the staircase, bowing hurriedly as they passed the Dean. The reverend gentleman, balked of his intended prey, stopped to speak to Lady Solightly, who was standing near the door receiving the steady stream of arriving guests. " And where are the young people ? " he asked, in his over-dulcet tones. " Where are they ? I want to wish them happiness, oh, so much happiness, in this world and the next."

" Thank you so much, dear Mr. Dean," said Lady Solightly, smiling. " Mr. Merivale is some-

where about and Muriel will be back with me in a few minutes. But I assure you they have no idea of going to America at present."

" Well, perhaps that is a good thing," he replied blandly, without perceiving the connection of the last remark. " That great country is indeed a long way off—a long way off—and there are so many here at home who are in need and worthy of our care. Now when are you going to help us in our work, Lady Solightly ? You would do so much good if you would do a little—just a little—in the way of visiting our poor——"

" Visit the poor ? " echoed Lady Solightly. " No, really, Mr. Dean, I 'm afraid I should n't do for that. I have no gift for that. Besides, I have n't time, I really have n't time. My visiting list is full already. I never *can* get through it in the season as it is. I could n't possibly visit the poor as well. There are so many of them, are n't there ? "

The old gentleman was slightly disconcerted and looked doubtfully at Lady Solightly, whilst she turned towards the staircase to welcome Radlet, who was piloting Mrs. Johns back again to the drawing-room from which she had fled with Mud-dington.

" No, I don't really know Miss Bowness at all," he was saying in reply to a question from Mrs. Johns, " though I know her brother very fairly

well, and greatly admire her books. What do *you* think. Has our friend done well?"

"I have only just caught a glimpse of her myself. But it struck me that Merivale ought to be satisfied. They say she has a large fortune and I noticed that she had a cough—a very promising cough."

Radlet laughed without appearing to enjoy the remark and turned to greet Lady Solightly whilst the Dean assumed possession of Mrs. Johns.

"How nice of you to find time to come," said Lady Solightly to Radlet, with a smile of real pleasure on her sweet face.

"How lucky for me that I could. I congratulate you and I want to congratulate Miss Bowness. Where is she?"

"She has been with me up till a few minutes ago. But she's not accustomed to this sort of thing, poor little girl. She has just slipped away to rest for a second or two."

"Then she has n't quite your heroism, Lady Solightly?"

"Not quite my practice, you mean," she laughed softly.

"So our young friends are to be united in the bonds of holy matrimony," the Dean was saying to Mrs. Johns. "But do tell me, for you know everything, what is the name of Lady Solightly's niece? I never can remember names."

"Miss Bowness," said Mrs. Johns, with a sigh of resignation.

"Miss Bowness. Ah, yes, Miss Bowness, of course. And it is a good match, is it not? Satisfactory in every particular? She has some money, I hope, for Merivale will need it. He is, I fear, none too well off. In fact, it *is* said—but there, there! No doubt it is all malevolent gossip."

"They say she brings him half a million," said Mrs. Johns baldly.

"Half a million? Really? Half a million? Dear, dear! How very satisfactory! What an admirable match."

"If you were to halve that sum," continued Mrs. Johns bluntly, "you would probably get as near the truth as—as you are ever likely to do."

There was the faintest possible emphasis on the "you."

"Really? Half a million? I must remember. But I hope she is worthy of Merivale. He has a great future in the political world. He will use his great power for good, I trust. And she? I hope she is really nice. Clever I know she is, but is she a really *good* girl?"

"Good? Oh, yes, I fancy so. At any rate she has a very moral dowry."

"Very," replied the Dean absently, for he had spied the opportunity for which he had been

waiting. " You will excuse me ? I see that our hostess is for the moment unoccupied and I am anxious to enlist her support on behalf of the Early Rising Bill, which I and the dear Archbishop——"

Mrs. Johns turned and smiled to Monckton, who crossed the room and came to her in expectation of the—news.

" The Dean hopes Miss Bowness is a really *good* girl," she said in response to his raised eyebrows.

" And what did you say ? "

" I said she had a very moral dowry."

Monckton laughed.

" Poor thing," he added; " I hope she is not too good."

" Why ? "

" It is so dangerous to be good. The good die young."

" I wonder why that is ? "

" They are bored to death, I suppose. I wonder if they have to pay higher insurance policies."

" I never asked."

" No, you don't like them, I know. Nor do I. Good people are so silly. I am glad you are not good—or you might have died young. I beg your pardon. I hardly meant to put it quite like that. Shall we get some supper ? "

As they made their way across the crowded room they passed Merivale, who was conducting Muriel

back to her aunt. Merivale introduced Monckton to her.

To the disappointment of many quasi-literary acquaintances, Muriel this evening, as always, absolutely refused to pose as an authoress or to be treated as a celebrity. She regarded herself simply as Lady Solightly's niece, very happily engaged to Arthur Merivale. She was there to be congratulated, but not to be made a fuss over, or to be patronized. Very pretty she looked in her unaffected simplicity, smilingly proud of her love. The dark waves of her hair and peach-bloom of her cheeks were set off to the best advantage by the dress she wore. It was in tones of yellow chiffon, the foundation being of the palest shade, with a soft, clinging skirt of accordion-pleated flounces edged with ruchings of a deeper yellow. She carried a posy of forced daffodils and mimosa, his gift.

"Oh, Miss Bowness," said Mrs. Johns, "you must beware of Mr. Monckton. He is very clever and very wicked. He has just been trying to persuade me that it is bad to be good because the good die young."

"I do not think that even Mr. Monckton could make me believe that," said Muriel. "For I want to be happy and I don't think the wicked are ever truly happy."

"Are you sure?" said Monckton. "Or is n't

the wish father to the thought ? Now I am sure I am dreadfully wicked and yet I have about the best time going. What do you say, Merivale ? ”

“ Oh, if one is to talk seriously, I must admit that I have known lots of sinners who have had years of perfect happiness in their sins. But I believe that sooner or later they have to pay for it. Sooner or later they have to pay for their happiness as well as for their sin, pay with years of remorse, or, it may be, with moments of bitterest misery and shame, that outweigh all their past delight and tinge with bitterness their future joy.”

He spoke with feeling in his deepest, most thrilling tones. Muriel pressed close to him and her hand tightened on his arm.

Monckton shifted his feet uneasily. Such seriousness seemed to him hardly good form.

“ You are very effective, Mr. Merivale,” laughed Mrs. Johns, “ but you are quite wrong. It is quite unnecessary to go through all that if you understand the art of life.”

“ And what is the art of life ? ” asked Merivale.

“ You have been describing the nature of life, which is that we should pay for all our sins. The art of life corrects that. It consists of making other people pay for them.”

She snapped her fan and as she moved away with a laugh, looked back over her shoulder at Merivale.

Monckton also watched his face.

"I believe," he said, "that Merivale is having one of those moments he described this very minute."

"I hope he is," said Mrs. Johns vehemently.
"I am not in love with Mr. Merivale."

"Are n't you?" Monckton inquired with an innocent surprise, which intentionally conveyed the meaning, "I always thought you were."

"Arthur," said Muriel, "there is a sofa unoccupied over there, in that recess. Take me there for a minute or two before I return to my duties."

Arthur obeyed and the neighboring guests presently melted away.

"How jolly it is to be alone for a second," he exclaimed. "That is the best of being engaged. Immediately you sit down anywhere together everybody always bolts, as if you had the plague. Before you are engaged, when you would be even more grateful for their absence, they *don't*, do they?"

"No," said Muriel with indifference. Then with a change of manner she added earnestly: "Arthur, I am afraid I sha' n't like this life in London. This eternal flippancy and gossiping, this unceasing persiflage and backbiting that goes on all around one is getting on my nerves already."

"Oh, you 'll soon get accustomed to it," he said

awkwardly. "It's only because you feel a bit strange. That'll soon wear off. You'll not mind the little things that jar a bit now."

"But I don't *want* to get accustomed to it. I don't want not to mind things. I don't want to pass over as harmless things that now sound strange and offensive."

"You mean, especially, I suppose, that you don't like the way Monckton and Mrs. Johns speak."

"Yes. I hate it."

"They don't mean anything by it, you know."

"Mrs. Johns means everything she says and a good deal more. She is always hinting and implying things about people—about you even."

Merivale's jaw hardened a little.

"Is she, little girl?" he said gently. "I know she is as spiteful as she is clever. She is an instance of what civilization can do for a woman. It merely accentuates her power of doing harm."

"I don't think her spiteful or clever. I think her simply vulgar and stupid."

"It is very much the same thing," said Merivale.

"Why does she speak of you in the way she does?"

"I don't quite know what you mean. But she has a kind of license. She has a short temper and a long purse and spares neither, so people tolerate her. Those who don't fear her tongue respect her cash

and those who don't care about the money respect her tongue. But she hates me for some reason or other."

"I don't believe it," said Muriel; "I think she is in love with you."

"It is very much the same thing," said Merivale lightly. "But what has she been saying to you about me?" he enquired.

"Oh, she has n't *said* anything," replied Muriel. "And Mr. Monckton—what do you think of him?"

"Monckton? You need n't bother about him. He's right enough in his way, though it is n't a very admirable one. He's what I call a necessary evil."

"I hate his way then. I hate the way he, also, apparently talks. It makes me feel—uncomfortable. But what do you mean by a 'necessary evil'?"

"Just one of those people whom one certainly would not choose for an intimate or for an only friend—people not desirable in themselves, but necessary to this sort of social life. They say hateful things that nobody really believes, but still, they laugh and talk and chatter and amuse. For them the one affirmative command of society is, 'Thou shalt be amusing.' And they are not far wrong. Nowadays people in society will pay

anything to be amused—pay anything, I mean, except their debts."

" Well, perhaps I am too much of a prude, too much of a country girl; but it does n't amuse me vastly, I must confess. But I 'm afraid it is n't correct not to be amused."

" No, you must not be serious and you must be amused," he said banteringly.

" I am glad you were serious just now, then. That shows once more that you have something in common with me. Oh, dear oh, dear, I must yawn."

" I hope you are not annoyed with me—or bored."

" With you ? Not at all. I only yawned because it is after ten o'clock, and nobody in the world, not even you, will ever stop me yawning after ten. Ten o'clock is my bed-time, and I want to go to bed, you know."

And whilst Merivale smiled at her with an intense look of love and admiration in his eyes, she, provokingly, yawned.

The voice of Colonel Gashouse was heard loud in the land. Deaf, bald, and florid, the old Anglo-Indian soldier had caught Mrs. Johns and was torturing her with his inanities.

" And it is my opinion," he boomed, " that unless the country wakes up and the Government pulls

itself together, we shall all go to the dogs, and mighty quick too."

"Yes, I quite agree with you, Colonel," said Mrs. Johns with an air of conviction. "But," she added, indicating with her fan the sofa close at hand on which Muriel sat yawning, "but we must stop talking politics now. For I see we are overheard." "Deaf old idiot," she muttered and laughed behind her fan.

"Eh! What!" shouted the Colonel. "I can't hear. (What's the old hag laughing at?) Yes, I know. I was saying the country will go to the dogs. Ah, that's young Merivale, is n't it? Clever young fellow, I'm told, but has been a bit wild. Good thing, too. However, I hear he has turned over a new leaf. Got tired of living on his debts, eh? and is going to marry an heiress and shunt the other—eh, what?"

He perceived at last that the violent signs of Mrs. Johns were intended to warn him that he was not whispering as he supposed. Luckily, at that moment Lady Solightly, who was anxious to get rid of the Dean of Catcheser and his politics, tapped the Colonel on the shoulder with her fan, whilst she exhorted the Dean to impart his scheme to the sympathetic ears of Mrs. Johns and the Colonel.

"The dear Dean has just been telling me all about his Early Rising Bill for the Working

Classes," she explained to them. " Such a good idea, is n't it ? Sloth is so bad for the lower orders. My maid is never up in time. I shall really have to get rid of her unless she can be taught to be more punctual."

" An Early Rising Bill ?" said Mrs. Johns. " Surely people are precocious enough already."

" An Early Rising Bill ?" bawled the Colonel. " Nonsense. I never heard of such a thing. What is it ?"

" I want so much to gain the support of military men," replied the Dean suavely. " This little scheme of mine, let me explain, is to provide that all the working classes shall get up at eight o'clock if not before."

" What!" cried the Colonel, whilst his bulbous nose turned vermillion. " Get a potato clock if not four ? Nonsense ! I never heard of such a thing. Turnips were good enough for their fathers. You 'll be giving them eighteen-carat gold watches soon by Act of Parliament ! What, sir ? Are you a socialist, a rascally socialist ? A potato clock, indeed !"

" Ha, ha !" laughed the Dean, nervously. " I see you are poking fun at me. For I think I have heard something like that before. But seriously I do wish to interest you in this scheme. Let us discuss it."

But the Colonel merely turned to Mrs. Johns and repeated:

"A rascally socialist, I 'll be bound."

The Dean blew his nose violently.

"I fear I must be going, dear Lady Solightly," he said to his hostess, who, having recovered Muriel and playfully chidden Merivale for keeping her all to himself for so long, was passing.

"Oh, not yet, please," she said.

"Yes, I fear. I fancy I have taken cold in my head."

"I am so sorry. You must take great care of yourself."

"Cold in his head," snorted the Colonel. "I should think so. If he has a cold anywhere it is sure to be in his head. Colds always fly to the weakest spot."

These social amenities were interrupted by the arrival of a footman who was carrying a note on a silver salver.

"A note for Mr. Merivale, my lady," he explained.

"Merivale! Merivale, and nothing but Merivale to-night!" murmured Monckton. His name, indeed, was this evening the bobbing cork which floated on the wave of the moment, amid the sea of gossip, of rumors of war, of chaff, of scandal, of badinage and flirtation, of cautious discussions,

of finance and delicate proposals of political intrigue.

The footman handed the note to Merivale and told him that a messenger was waiting for a reply.

Merivale took the note, glanced at the handwriting, and frowned. It was marked urgent.

"Will you excuse me?" he bowed politely to Lady Solightly and then to Muriel. "This appears to be urgent."

He opened the note nervously as he spoke and read it. His jaws were set, but his lips moved uneasily. This was what was written:

Perfide! Perfide!! Perfide!!! Comme vous êtes *lâche!* You saw me at your political meeting and you fled. You know that I am looking for you and you try to hide from me. You coward! I cannot discover your address. I want to see you. I *must* see you. I have written twice to the House of Commons and have received no answer. I read in the papers that Lady Solightly is giving a reception to-night and it seems that you and *your fiancée* are the occasion of it. I must have an explanation at once. Unless the messenger who brings you this letter returns within an hour with a note from you telling me when and where I can see you to-morrow, I will come to Berkeley Square and make a scene to-night. Voilà.

A toi,

Li-Li.

Merivale frowned as he read the letter and bit his lip.

" What is it, Arthur ? " Muriel asked anxiously.

" It 's a note from a Russian lady whom I met some years ago in Vienna. She is mixed up with Continental politics and did me some service once in the way of giving me information. But she 's not the kind of person I want to have much to do with now. She is apparently very anxious to see me, however. Well, well, I must be polite and answer her note—I did not know even that she was in England or ever likely to be, so I was rather surprised at hearing from her in this unceremonious fashion. Perhaps she has some startling political secret to communicate."

Monckton, who was standing close at hand, behind Merivale, smiled and then coughed. Then he remarked to the Duke of Muddington in a low voice of portentous gravity :

" I hope we are not in for any foreign complications."

" Will you excuse me whilst I write a note ? " Merivale continued, addressing Lady Solightly, with grave politeness.

" By all means," she replied. " You will find paper and pens in my boudoir. You know the way ? "

Merivale retired and scribbled a line. To judge from the violent dipping and scratching of his pen he wrote angrily. But when he had finished one

side of the paper, he stopped, reread what he had written, and then lit a candle on the writing-table. This done, he held the sheet to the flame and carefully burnt every scrap of it. Next he took a fresh sheet of paper and wrote a short note, sealed it and rang the bell, and gave it to a footman to consign to the messenger who waited below.

"I shall be charmed to see you," was all he wrote, "to-morrow, Wednesday, afternoon at five o'clock, in my rooms at Westminster Mansions. Say that you have an appointment. Wednesday is an off day for us poor hard-worked politicians."

The note was not addressed.

Muriel when she went to bed that night found herself curiously weary and irritable. Had the innuendoes of Mrs. Johns opened her eyes? Had she heard and understood any of the gossip which had been floating about that hot crowded centre of London uncharitableness? Or why was it that she asked herself in a cold, hard voice how it came about that Russian ladies wrote to Arthur and signed themselves "A toi, Li-Li"? Why did her thoughts harp back to the scene of that political meeting and why did she wonder and wonder who the lady in the gay hat of red roses could really have been?



CHAPTER XI

MERCI, MONSIEUR

MATHEMATICIANS who study the laws of chances are very clever people. They always succeed in demonstrating to perfection theories on which no sane man would think for a moment of acting. Moralists and philosophers may with their mathematics prove to my poor intellect that there is no such thing as luck, but in my heart of hearts I know that there is. I prefer the evidence of prolonged observation and experience to the mere probabilities of reason. The behavior of money and cards carefully observed in connection with different manipulators is enough to convince any practical man that certain people have the attribute of being lucky and others not.

Merivale believed strongly in luck; he believed, further, in the theory of cycles of luck. He held that one is lucky and unlucky by periods. A run of good luck may hold for some years, with some people it may hold for a lifetime. But usually it

alternates with periods of misfortune. When you are in for a spell of good luck, therefore, he used to say, run it for all it is worth; when the luck turns, lie low. If the rumors which we have seen were current about him were to any extent true, it must be admitted that he was boldly following his own precept. And so far the luck had held. Would it hold to the end?

Some such speculation, perhaps, was passing through his mind as he sat frowning and gnawing at his quill at his writing-bureau the following afternoon. He had been lunching with the Solightlys and seen Muriel. She had been cold, and, as he phrased it, a little queer towards him. Was she merely tired with last night's reception or had she heard anything? He had stopped in Bond Street on his way home and despatched a messenger-boy to her with a beautiful ruby brooch. Then he had driven back to his flat in Westminster Mansions and given orders to his man Chingford only to admit a single lady, who would say that she had an appointment. Now he sat, awaiting the approaching interview with, apparently, some uneasiness.

There was a ring at the bell of his flat. Chingford, the very wise and decorous Chingford, allowed a decent interval to elapse, then opened the door.

"Is Mr. Merivale in?" asked Lady Solightly.

"No, my lady," answered Chingford stolidly, for

he had caught sight of Muriel also and knew, as he reckoned it, that this was not the party referred to.

"Are you sure?" persisted her ladyship. "The concierge said Mr. Merivale came in half an hour ago. But if he is n't in I am sure he would not mind our waiting for him here for a quarter of an hour, in case he returns. My niece particularly wishes to see him."

"Mr. Merivale may have gone out without It's seeing him, my lady," returned Chingford, not trusting himself to a gender for the strange beast which had been quoted as an authority. "But I likewise may be mistook. If you will kindly wait, I will go and look, my lady."

The astute Chingford had the courage to be rude to a title and shutting the door of the flat he kept Lady Solightly and Muriel out on the narrow stone landing of the Mansions, whilst he hastily informed Merivale of the situation.

"Show them in," said Merivale, hurriedly, after consulting his watch. "I shall slip into my bedroom. Tell them that I may be in about five, but if I don't turn up by then I am always invariably out on Wednesdays until it is time to dress for dinner. You've done quite right."

He got up as he spoke, locked the Sheraton bureau at which he had been sitting, and dropped

the key into a brass Benares pot that stood on the top of it.

"Mr. Merivale is hout, my lady," Chingford announced with a faint air of triumph, "but if you will kindly step in and wait he may be back shortly. But if he does not return by five on Wednesdays he very seldom gets in before dinner-time, my lady."

"Is it worth while, dear?" said Lady Solightly.

"Yes, please. Besides, I should like to see his rooms, now we're here, would n't you?"

"Very well. But we must n't keep the horses waiting too long."

The ladies advanced into the tiny flat and both of them were speedily busy spying out the peculiarities of a bachelor's rooms.

Chingford was withdrawing, but he was recalled by the rising inflection of Lady Solightly's "Oh, er——"

"Yes, my lady."

"If Mr. Merivale does not return very soon we should like to write a note."

She looked expressively at the Sheraton cabinet.

"Yes, my lady," said Chingford meekly, and advancing gingerly to the Benares pot extracted the key, opened the bureau, and laid out a sheet of note-paper and a pen. He was not quite sure if he was doing right. He was, as a matter of fact, do-

ing very wrong. It was at this point that the tide of Merivale's luck began to turn.

"Thank you," said Lady Solightly. She sat down and drummed with her fingers on the table. She was an active, busy, restless person, and she was soon very tired of waiting. Besides, the carriage horses were on her mind.

"Now, dear," she said, after five minutes had elapsed and all the recesses of the room had been scrutinized through her lorgnettes. "We must n't wait a second longer or the horses will catch cold—or Thomas will say they have, which comes to the same thing, for we sha'n't be allowed to have the carriage for a week. Thomas is the best coachman in London, but he is a dreadful tyrant. When you are married, my dear, you must set your face against two things."

"What are they, Aunt Fanny?" Muriel enquired absently. She had taken a seat at the writing-table and was scribbling a note with a scratchy quill.

"Being bullied by your servants and taking breakfast with your husband. Always breakfast in your own room. Breakfast should be a close season for husbands. The best of men are bears at breakfast."

"Oh, Arthur 's not a bear! He 's an angel. I shall never quarrel with him, I know—even at

breakfast. He's an angel, *really*. But I wish he had not flown just now. I did so want just to see him and thank him for that brooch and to tell him about Aunt Bella's wedding present."

"Nonsense, child. You saw him at lunch and you'll see him at dinner, you know." Lady Solightly spoke sharply, but she smiled sympathetically all the same.

"Yes, but it was so sweet of him to send me this brooch, and I know why he did it, too. Just because *I* was rather cross and dull at lunch."

The quill scratched violently.

"What *are* you doing, dear. What are those scratches for?"

"Oh, those are for kisses, of course."

"Oh, don't waste time doing that. I am sure he would prefer them by word of mouth."

Muriel laughed and put down her pen.

"No blotting paper," she cried. "How like a man. I am afraid you will have to wait a moment till the ink is dry. It really won't take long."

Whilst she waited she turned the key of the little door in the centre of the Sheraton cabinet, which was now exposed to view, and, with aimless curiosity, opened it. She drew out from the recess revealed a full-length cabinet-photograph in a green leather frame. It was the photograph of a very smartly dressed woman in a large hat full of nod-

ding roses and it was signed " Li-Li." The tide of Merivale's luck was certainly beginning to ebb.

She looked at it hard for a while and then she repeated in a hard voice:

" He is an angel, is n't he ? "

As she spoke she tore up the letter she had written and wrote on another half sheet, " Who is Li-Li ? "

" What do you say, dear ? " said Lady Solightly.

" Arthur *is* an angel, is n't he ? "

" An angel ? Well, he has a fine pair of shoulders: but I never noticed his wings. But you must n't expect to marry an angel, my dear. In fact, I should never dream of allowing you to, if I could help it. Angels would n't get on in society at all. They would be much too apt to fly away. Besides, it would be so difficult to ascertain their incomes, and their political opinions, probably, would n't suit. Oh, no. It would never do. Now, *do* come, dear."

" Yes, Aunt Fanny," said Muriel, and followed her aunt meekly from the room. She had taken the photograph out of its frame, whilst Lady Solightly had been rattling on, and had placed it in the little green bag which hung from her wrist. Next she had put back the empty frame in the recess and locked the tiny door. Then she shut the cabinet, locked it too, and replaced the key in the

Benares pot. Her note she placed on a silver tray which was on a small table near the door.

As soon as the ladies departed Merivale emerged from his bedroom.

"Oh, I do feel like a brute!" he growled in a tone of intense disgust. "How loathsome all this deception is! Dear, sweet, kind, pure little girl! But I could n't possibly have faced you just now, anyway. *What* a brute, *what* a brute, what a *brute* I am! Well, it will soon be all over, that's one comfort."

He took up the photograph of Muriel which stood on the mantel-shelf and gazed at it long and ardently.

"Is everybody as weak and wicked as me, I wonder?" He spoke aloud and then corrected his grammar: "As I am? Poor, dear Liane, it is cruel bad luck on you, too. But what could I do? How could I help it?"

He placed Muriel's photograph on the large square table in the middle of the room and walked slowly towards the Sheraton cabinet, took out the key, and opened it. Then he opened the inner door and drew out the photograph frame, which lay there—empty.

He started back when he saw that the photograph had disappeared.

"Gone!" he cried. "What the devil is the

meaning of this? Nobody knows where I keep the key—except Chingford. Chingford!" He rang the bell violently. As he waited for the appearance of his valet he walked hastily up and down the room. He caught sight of Muriel's note on the table near the door, took it up, and read it feverishly. "Who is Li-Li?" he read aloud. "God in heaven!"

Chingford came in. Perturbed and apologetic was his manner when he saw the anger and annoyance of his master.

"Did you open that bureau just now?" Merivale asked in low tones of suppressed rage.

"Yes, sir. Miss Bowness expressed a desire to write a note, sir, and I——"

"What the devil do you mean by being such a fool?"

"I am sorry, sir. I presumed that no harm——"

"What the dickens do you mean by 'presuming' at all? It is not your place to 'presump,' as you call it, and as you don't know your place, you can leave my service at once."

"Yes, sir, but I must ask for a month's notice, sir, or a month's wages."

"A month's wages? I 'm hanged if you shall have a month's wages. You 're just the sort of man who would die before the month was up, if you got them."

"No, sir. Excuse me, you do me an injustice. You hurt my professional pride. I may be a poor man, but I am honest. I am very proud of my punctuality. You must own, sir, that I have always been very punctual."

"Oh, hang you!" cried Merivale. "Clear out. Do you hear? Don't let me see your face again. For heaven's sake, go! go!! go!!!” He banged his fist on the table. Chingford went. But he reappeared again, in a few minutes, hat in hand and coat on arm.

"Breakfast at the usual hour, sir?" he said, insinuatingly. "At the usual hour I hopines." And he was gone, and with his temporary departure the tide of Merivale's ill-luck began to make. He sat at the big square table in the middle of the room and groaned.

"What am I to do? Is this to be the end of it? It always seemed too good to be true. And now it is too hideous—too hideous. Poor Muriel!"

The electric bell rang. He did not move. There came a longer, louder ring. He started up and went to the door himself, for he remembered that he was alone in the flat.

Waiting outside the door was a smartly dressed lady in a hat of nodding red roses. She was a tall and very beautiful brunette, most unmistakably

French, both in manner and figure. For her figure was distorted into a gross misrepresentation of Nature's designs. Instead of being content with the admirable lines of a woman she had twisted herself, according to the fashion of the day, into the shape of a deformed wasp. She caused surprise to the observant by not pitching on her nose, a thing which, by the laws of gravity, she ought continually to have done. There was also too obvious an application of powder on her cheeks and her lips were not innocent of rouge. But apart from these national peculiarities and perhaps because of them, she was adorably pretty and piquant. There was an extraordinary charm of movement in her every attitude and a fascinating vivacity in her manner and speech. Her voice was low and soft and her eyes, beneath straight and exquisitely marked eyebrows, were of a wonderful shade of blue.

She made a little rush at Merivale when she saw that it was he who had opened the door. But he put out his arm to hold her off.

"C'est fini!" he said, retreating. "You must understand that this interview will last exactly ten minutes." He took out his watch and looked at the time sternly. "And in that time you will explain what you want and why you have come over here contrary to my express stipulations."

"Oh! La, la! La, la!" she laughed. "Comme

c'est gauche, cet Anglais! Mon Dieu! Tu n'es pas gentil avec moi aujourd'hui, alors?"

Merivale shut the door of the sitting-room.

"No," he said brutally. "I am not. You know perfectly well that I am not and am never going to be. Our lives have parted. You must have understood that, surely, when I left Paris and arranged your income on the condition that you never came to England. What do you mean by coming to England now and hunting me up and down like this? You will ruin me, do you understand? You will ruin me!"

"Ruin you! Chansons! And if I do, what have you done to me?"

Merivale turned pale. He rose from his chair and paced the room.

"You are quite right," he said at last. "You have every right to reproach me. But you cannot reproach me more bitterly than I reproach myself. Still, you have nothing to gain by behaving like this. We both have fortune to blame even more than ourselves. I made the position clear enough to you when we parted in Paris and I was as generous to you as I could possibly afford to be. Isn't that right?"

"Right? Oh, yes, of course. All right! *Très* all right!" She bit her lip as she spoke and looked bitterly at Merivale, swinging her dainty feet backwards and forwards the while.

"Then what do you mean by following me to England? What did you come to that election meeting for? You nearly—very nearly——"

"Arthur, I could not help it."

The words came soft and liquid from her throat and a great tenderness welled up into her eyes as she looked in supplication towards him. "I will tell you all the truth and you must tell me all the truth too. I came because I love you and you are all I have in the world. I came because I wanted to witness your triumph and share in it and listen to your eloquence and delight in it. I came because I was so proud of you and because I love you—and also because I was jealous. I read in the *New York Herald* some gossip about you and a certain English girl in the constituency which you were fighting. I could not bear that. I had to come and see for myself. Generous to me! Yes, you were indeed!" she broke out indignantly. "But do you think I have no heart? Do you think I care for nothing but money? Oh, Arthur, Arthur, you might have known me better, surely! Oh, Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Ce n'est pas toujours drôle, la vie." She began to sob the dry, hard sobs that are the most terrible to witness.

"For God's sake, be calm," said Merivale, steeling himself with a great effort against the appeal of her love and misery.

"Calm! Then I will be calm. But tell me the truth once for all, though I have not really any need to be told it. That girl on the platform that day—that lumpy pudding of an English girl—that niece of the Comtesse last evening—it is true that you go to marry her, is it? *Is it, I say?*" She stamped her foot in a paroxysm of jealous rage.

"Yes, it is true," answered Merivale in a firm, measured tone. "I am sorry for you. Very, very sorry. I hate myself both for your sake and for hers. But," he raised his hand imperiously and the words died away on her lips. "But you must listen to reason. It is hard, I know. But everybody, sooner or later, has to listen to reason and face the facts. What are the facts? You know as well as I, Li-Li." As he uttered her name for the first time, she looked quickly up at him and the yearning love in her eyes unmanned him. His voice broke. But he recovered himself and went on, with a gentle movement of the hand and a pathetic look in his face that seemed to ask pardon for the cruelty of his words. "Li-Li, whether I marry this girl or not, it can make no difference to you. Whether I marry her or not, you and I must part. We must now, once and for all, put an end to our—to our friendship, n'est-ce pas? There is no way out of it. Everything demands it. My public position is jeopardized every moment by your pres-

ence here. My whole career may be ruined in a second. And now that I have just begun to arrive, as you say, I cannot, will not risk it. At any minute the spite of some personal enemy, who might get to know—to know about you and me—might prove my ruin. I could not live with this sword of Damocles over my head. It would paralyze my abilities altogether. If it fell—oh, you do not know England! We do not admit that these things can be done. We do not tolerate them as you do in France. The cry of the Nonconformist conscience would be heard in the land and I should be hounded out of politics. It has happened before. A word, a hint, a libel action forced upon me—and picture the lamentations of one's supporters and the maddening reproaches of one's aunts by marriage! No, Li-Li, it can't go on. It is too risky. All good things come to an end. We have had a good time. We have been very, very happy,—but we must part. It's all over now. Mais, c'est fini!"

Li-Li rose from her seat and moved towards him, breathing hard with indignation.

"How dare you speak like that!" she cried. "What has your *career* to do with me? What do I care for your public position? Did I give you my love because you took an interest in politics?"

He had avoided saying a word about Muriel so far, but her unerring instinct made her see with a

terrible clearness that, whether it was good policy or not, he really loved the girl he meant to wed—and loved her too with a respect and devotion which he had never given to her.

"Dear child," said Merivale, gently. "Dear Li-Li. Don't make it harder for me than it is already. I tell you we must face the facts. I have given you one reason why it must be all over between us—my career. Now I shall give you the other. It is a less selfish and a stronger one. I said we must face the facts. Money is the most potent, the most vile; and the most maddening of facts. I am practically at the end of my resources. You have known that ever since we quarrelled over your dancing in Paris. Since the doctor has forbidden you to dance any more, even that source of income, if I were base enough to live on your earnings, is taken from us. I have no longer the money to keep you in the style of luxury your nature needs, and, living abroad with you, I could not earn it. You know that well enough." He paused and drew his hand across his brow. "Well," he added, "the girl I am going to marry has a very large fortune. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," she replied between her teeth,—"I understand that you are a liar!"

He swung round quickly and faced her.

"Yes," he said, "I am, and I am glad you saw

it. I am not marrying her for her money. I am marrying her because I love her, I love her,—do you hear?"

Li-Li turned horribly pale, but she forced a smile of incredulous scorn to her lips.

"In love? Oh, yes. I've no doubt you think you are."

"I know I am. And I know that my love for her is pure and true—yes, and worthy even of hers. I love her with all my heart and soul and mind."

"Your *heart*! But you are mistaken. You only love her in the passing sort of way that a man will love any girl he is alone with in the country quinze jours. And you had six weeks of it and more! Oh, but it is absurd! She is really so plain, so dreadfully plain. I saw her. But just because she is strange to him and he sees her often a man pins his thoughts on a girl for a while and picking out her passable nose or her lovely eyebrow, as partially as a sudden sunbeam, he dreams about it and thinks he is in love and tells himself that there never was and never will be such a girl and swears that he cannot live without her. But there was, *mais très souvent*, and there is, and he can. Oh, I know! And *you* can. You will. You will soon forget all about her. Arthur! Arthur! It would be absurd to throw me over for such a chit as that—absurd, and so cruel. Oh, so *cruel!* Arthur!"

She held out her hands to him with an imploring gesture. A smile played on her quivering lips, but the tears were trembling on her lower lashes.

" You are wrong, Li-Li," Arthur answered in a voice scarce audible. " This is the one great love of my life."

She uttered a cry like that of a child in pain.

" You mean that ? And now you turn me off like a housemaid, after I have loved you faithfully four whole years. You take my love and the best years of my life, you ruin me and spoil me, and then cast me off because of your career and of a silly little English miss! Why did you not think of your career before? Why did you not warn me that any English girl with money was better than poor, pretty little Li-Li, who only had her love to give you—and herself, and gave them, oh, so gladly ? I suppose it is all my fault for being taken by surprise like this. A woman should never trust a man and never be faithful to him. She ought to look out for herself. And I always thought you were not like other men. I suppose everybody saw this coming and has been laughing at me all the time. Everybody knew you were tired of me long ago, except myself, of course. That is the way of the world, isn't it ? Poor Li-Li was too innocent. Mon Dieu !

" You know what all this means for a woman like me, don't you ? Think of my life. Oh ! I sha'n't

starve, thanks. I know that. I sha'n't starve. Before it comes to that, I shall—Ah! I suppose you are teaching *her* to play the mandolin now, are n't you? The dear little English miss."

She had espied as she moved about the room in an agony of despair and rage a mandolin resting on a chair in the corner. She picked it up as she spoke and with a sudden change of manner she began to speak like a little girl who is planning a romance. If she was acting, her art was wonderful, though her knowledge of Merivale must have helped her greatly to hit upon what would most appeal to him. But it is more probable that she caught at the idea that flashed through her brain and talked of it, at first, at any rate, merely from an overwhelming desire to escape the torture of the present reality. In that case, she was certainly not less pathetic.

"Before that, I will tell what I will do. I shall take my mandolin and go out into the streets with my maid; for it would not do to go alone if I was still pretty. I would go with her—and—oh, yes!" She clapped her hands and laughed with merry delight at the idea. "She shall be dressed in yellow, for she is dark, too, and I shall be dressed in red, with short skirts, like this." She stood before Merivale and drew her dress up to her knees, thrusting forward a black-stockinged leg. "And I

would wear my hair down my back—like this, is n't it ? ” She laughed and, taking the pins out of her hat, let down her long, dark tresses in a trice. She shook her head and the beautiful waves of her hair broke over her shoulders and rippled down her back.

“ Li-Li ! ” cried Arthur, “ don't ! ”

“ Or like this,” she said, and as she spoke she twisted her hair into a coil on the top of her head, Spanish fashion. “ With just a bit of red ribbon here ! ”

“ Quelle môme ! ” laughed Arthur, forgetting himself in the fascination of her pathetic fooling.

“ Or would you like this better ? ” she asked, and swiftly transformed herself into the cavalière style.

“ Comme vous êtes une petite gamine—une gosse charmante ! ”

She laughed and continued her story.

“ And then we would stand in the street and I should sing, just like a good little orphan girl, ‘ O, A.’ ”

She struck the mandolin as she sang and bending over it looked up bewitchingly at Arthur. Again she sounded the mandolin and again she trilled a few liquid notes, again she stooped and with her head on one side smiled up at him. Her face was close to his as she drew herself up to her full height once more. He yielded to the spell, bent down and kissed her on the forehead. And the scent of her

hair in his nostrils was as the bouquet of some wonderful wine. He took her cheeks between his hands and kissed her again. With a quick movement of her head she shook the curls from her forehead, and striking the mandolin she sang again “ O, A ! ” Then mockingly, she dropped a curtsey and said, “ Merci, Monsieur ! ”

“ And then,” she continued, “ when people heard the poor little, good little, pretty little girl in short skirts singing like that, they would come to their dining-room windows and listen — the dear English people ! You know the sort of windows ? A dirty, dingy window with a straw - plaited qu'est-ce que c'est across it, darkening a large, dirty, dingy, respectable room with mahogany furniture inside. And I would come to them on Sunday afternoon when they were dull and sentimental and had overeaten and over-drunk themselves more than usual—you know ?—and they would come to the window and throw money at me when I sang like this—or—oh, yes ! ” she laughed mischievously, “ I would sing them a naughty little French song perhaps, très léger, you know, and look very good all the time. And they would think it so good and throw me lots and lots of money. Comme ça ! ” She went through the pantomime of a street singer. Strumming on the mandolin she looked up at an imaginary house while she sang :

“Combien je regrette
Le temps perdu—”

She stopped singing and still smiling up at the imaginary house, stooped down and pretended to pick up the coin which had been flung to her.

“Merci, Madame!” she cried, “Merci, Monsieur!” And continued to sing:

“Combien je regrette
Le temps—”

“Merci, Madame! Merci, Monsieur, Monsieur! Or—you are a poet—you will make me a poésie to suit them, n'est-ce-pas? No? Eh, bien! I will make one for myself I will give them an opéra of my own. Écoute!” She sang, extemporizing in mock Italian style, “Faites moi la charité!” You won't grudge me sixpence then, will you, Arthur?”

And Arthur, who had sunk down upon a chair and, cheek in hand, was gazing at her, cried out in answer:

“Oh! Li-Li! Li-Li! For God's sake don't!”

She put down the mandolin and drew near to him.

“Li-Li?” she repeated. “Ah, there will be no one to call me Li-Li, then! They will call me—they will call me—what will they call me?”

“You will always be Li-Li to me,” he said tenderly.

" And what is Li-Li to you ? "

" How can I tell you ? An exquisite memory—a perfect experience—a darling, wee woman. Oh, more, Li-Li." He took her on his knee and kissed her: " Oh, so much more ! The greatest revelation and the greatest joy of my life—my one, my only Li-Li ! "

" Oh ! " she murmured with a sigh of content. Then with a sudden change of manner, she said playfully : " You did n't know how to speak like that when we first met ! "

" I did n't know the back of a woman's skirt from the front when I first met you."

She laughed. " H'm. How very awkward that sounds ! But what will your—your wife say when she finds that you are not so innocent as you ought to be—as you were, as I was once—*then* ? "

Arthur kissed her again, then seized her hand and kissed it.

" Oh ! " he said, " when she asks me, ' Who taught you to kiss a woman's hand like that ? ' I shall have to answer, ' Li-Li ! ' And when she wonders how I know what a woman likes to be told, I shall have to say, ' It was Li-Li who taught me how to whisper these things ! ' And when I kiss her—kiss her like this—I shall have to confess that it was like this I used to kiss Li-Li. It was so that Li-Li used to think and laugh and do her hair and sing and

speak and love me. And when she sees that I am gazing into her eyes, into her eyes like this, and yet that I am thinking of another, she will know, I expect, that it is of Li-Li that I am thinking—Li-Li!"

He took her in his arms and pressed her to him and kissed her passionately. She let herself sink gradually on his breast, her head thrown over his left arm, whilst his right arm was flung round her knees. Intoxicated for the moment by her charm he had spoken treason to his real love and now he said in a voice thick with passion: "Li-Li! Li-Li! I cannot, *cannot* give you up!"

She sprang from him and picking up the mandolin struck a few notes and said again with a mock curtsey:

"Merci, Monsieur! Merci, beaucoup!"

A loud ring at the electric bell startled them. Merivale jumped up from his chair and put his hand to his head. Who could it be? Chingford was out. Fool that he was to have sent him. How could he answer the bell himself now if he was to prevent his visitor from coming in? He would not, he determined at once, answer it at all. Let the visitor ring till Chingford returned! He hastened to the window and looked down into the street. Far below, among the vehicles in the street, he beheld Lady Solightly's carriage turning away empty from

the door of the Mansions and taking up its place on the rank of waiting carriages.

"Lady Solightly's carriage," he said. "Heaven help me!"

"I will answer the door and let them in!" said Li-Li. She was near the door, and before he could catch her she had rushed from the room, her flying hair about her shoulders, pursued by Merivale. She reached the door of the flat and flung it open. She had caught his words and realized instantaneously that Lady Solightly and Muriel were probably waiting outside the flat. What mad impulse or what sudden deep calculation prompted her? Women of her kind, quick to laughter and quick to tears, generous and selfish, compassionate and vindictive, do often take sudden and violent measures in obedience to the instinct that prompts them. Intuitively she had leaped to the conclusion that if Muriel was suddenly confronted with her presence in Arthur Merivale's rooms, the marriage, which meant the ruin of her own life and love, might be averted. In that case she might easily regain her old influence over him. The social ruin of Merivale was her best chance. Without hesitation she rushed to accomplish it.

Muriel stood at the door awaiting an interview with Arthur. She had seized the opportunity of her aunt's long sojourn in the stores to drive round

by herself to Arthur's chambers. The drive, she explained to her conscience, would keep the horses from catching cold, and if Aunt Fanny had to wait, that reflection would easily procure her forgiveness. She had come determined to be told who this Li-Li was who corresponded with Arthur and whose photograph he kept carefully secreted in his writing-desk. She felt angry with him, jealous and suspicious, but at the same time her good judgment enabled her not to give way to these feelings. She was cool and ready to be reasonable.

But the answer to her second determined ring shocked her cruelly. The door was flung violently open by a woman whose gay but dishevelled appearance was damning enough, even if Arthur had not been observed to have seized the woman's left hand in a vain and desperate endeavor to prevent her from opening the door.

"Arthur!" she cried, "how horrible! Oh, how horrible!" and stunned by the shock of this revelation she turned to retreat downstairs. But Arthur, flinging aside Li-Li's hand, sprang after Muriel and roughly seized her by the arm.

"Don't touch me," she said, "don't dare to touch or speak to me!"

"You must come into my rooms," he said, speaking with a terrible energy of despair, his voice trembling with rage and mortification and shame.

" You *must* come and hear now and at once the whole story—the whole explanation. It is the only chance for all of us."

She turned and followed him. In silence all three entered the sitting-room. Muriel was deadly pale, but very quiet. Who can tell what agony of shame, disappointment, and disgust she was suffering ? But she had decided that it was fair and wise, perhaps, to listen to whatever explanation there was, and, like the strong, brave girl she was, she nerved herself to endure it. The first thing which she saw when she entered the room was the tell-tale hat lying on the table. She burst into a bitter laugh.

" You need n't tell me who this person is," she said as she drew the photograph from her satchel, " though that is what I came to find out. I recognize Li-Li. Mademoiselle Li-Li, is n't it ? "

There was dead silence.

Muriel walked up to a small table on which a large " engagement " card stood in a red morocco-leather frame. She picked it up and read it aloud in a harsh, unnatural voice:

" ' Wednesday.—Lunch with Solightly's. Buy collars. See Moraine. L.' (that 's Li-Li, I suppose). ' 5.30. Dine Pomeroy's, 8. Muriel. Thursday, Friday, Saturday—Wednesday.' Ah, here it is! ' My Wedding Day.' I am afraid you have made a little mistake. But it can easily be altered.

This rubs out very easily. Yes, I thought so. There, I have erased it now. It has n't left much mark. You will be able to make another entry for next Wednesday quite well, won't you ? "

She laughed again, dry, bitter laughter, and flung the engagement-block down on the table.

Arthur rushed imploringly towards her: " Muriel, for God's sake—" Then he stopped and came no nearer her. Shame smote him as a sword when his eyes met hers.

Li-Li meanwhile had been sitting coiling her hair. Now that she had finished she looked at Muriel with an insolent air of criticism.

" So this," she now broke in, " this is the little English miss who has stolen my lover. Oh, yes! I see she is not so plain as I thought. But she has much to learn. Her hair, now, would look much nicer if it were done like mine and not like your everlasting English jug-handle, would n't it, Arthur ? And a little powder, too, would do wonders. And, oh, dear, how she walks. Comme ça, n'est-ce pas ? "

As she spoke she burlesqued the natural stride of English womanhood, and, when she arrived at the mirror over the fireplace, produced from her reticule a tiny box and a pencil of rouge and calmly applied rouge and powder to her own face.

She turned and laughed at Arthur.

" We are two artists, you and I. You are a poet and I am a painter. The little English girl does not understand——"

" Stop!" Arthur shouted; " you shall not insult Miss Bowness. You shall not speak like that. I will not allow it. I have spoilt her life, I have spoilt yours. I have spoilt mine. Abuse and insult me. I am the blackguard. But you shall not speak like that before her."

" It is enough," said Muriel. " Let me go."

The dignity of her manner did not disguise the cruel pain in her voice. But Li-Li came forward and, speaking in a very different manner, said quite gently:

" Mr. Merivale is right. I am sorry. I will not speak like that. Only stay for a little and let me tell you why I am here and why I have a right to be —why I have a right to remain."

For the desire had come upon Li-Li to justify herself in the eyes of this girl, who represented to her everything in the social scale which herself had lost. Mingled with that desire was the belief that the more clearly Muriel was informed of the situation the more certainly would she turn her back on Merivale forever.

Muriel waited in silence.

" My right is," said Li-Li, " my right is that I love him and——"

" *You* love him!" Muriel broke out scornfully,
" you don't know what love is!"

Anger flamed in Li-Li's eyes. " What have *you* done to give you the right to say that to me? You love him, I can see that, and in spite of everything you will love him. But can your love compare to mine? Not for an instant. What sacrifices have you made to your love? None, and you will not. And I—I have given my honor, my life, my past, my future, my friends, the memory of my father—oh, God! and of my mother in Heaven—I, I have given all, all for him! And you tell me that I do not love him—you, with your little, dainty, mincing air of superior virtue—and you tell me I don't know what love is. If I do not know, then who does? If I don't, do you? I do love him. And love is all my life. What has a woman like me to live for but love—love, love, love always and nothing but love? You with your cold admirations, your calculated devotions, your false enthusiasms, your undeveloped passions—what do you girls of the *beau monde* know of love? I know you. My Arthur to you is merely a nice man, a successful man—a good chap and a good match, a better catch than most, a pleasanter fellow than most, a creature a little more interesting than the picture of the year it is the fashion to rage over, a good enough pretext for a wedding trousseau which will be described in

all the ladies' papers, a thing you hope to go through life with comfortably and successfully—a probable part of your triumphant existence. That is what love means to you. What is he to *me*, do you think?"

She paused breathless with passion, then resumed more calmly:

" You loathe and despise me. You think I am some horrible wild beast. I am human like yourself. If you had my fortune you would be standing in my place now. You shake your head. You know so little of life that you cannot believe that? Very well. Let me tell you my history and then judge me. I will tell it you as a nurse tells a story to a little child. Yes.

" There was once a little girl, an orphan girl. She was Suisse. She was very pretty, very, very pretty, but she had never been happy all her life long. All her days, so far back as she can remember, she had lived in an orphanage school in Switzerland, and everybody there was very unkind to her and very cruel, because she was very, very poor and because she was so pretty. All the schoolmistresses, as she grew up, were jealous of her, because she was so pretty and because it was at her that all the gentlemen in the street used to look. And the girls in the school were unkind to her too, because they were jealous and because they hoped to curry favor with

the governesses by ill-treating her. They made her, between them, do all kinds of hard and nasty work which the delicate little girl ought never to have done, and they beat her. There was never a kind word for her and never enough to eat.

" What was your childhood like ?

" At last one day, when she was nearly seventeen, to make her more unhappy, the mistress caused her little kitten to be drowned. It was a little kitten which she had saved from a litter that had been condemned to death and which she had fed and nourished all by herself with her own food. It was the only living thing that had ever loved her; the only friend she had ever been allowed to love. They killed it. The little girl was mad with rage and grief when she saw the dead, wet body of her kitten—do you blame her ? Just as she was, in her pinafore and without a hat, she ran out from the orphanage determined never to enter it again alive. She did not want to die. All she wanted was to escape from the cruel friends who had starved and beaten her and then killed her little kitten out of spite. So she ran away, ran for miles and miles, along the hot, white, dusty roads, on towards the snow-capped mountains, on towards the cool waters of the lake. At last she could go no farther, though the lake was still a long, long way off. She sat down by the roadside faint and hungry and

trembling lest she should be pursued and overtaken. A lady passed in a carriage and seeing that the little girl was crying, she threw her two sous. The little girl got up and walked on till she came to a tiny shop on the road. She thought she would be able to buy a lot to eat for two sous, for she did not know the value of money at all. But she was only able to get one roll. She took and ate it and struggled on and on, remembering that every step took her farther and farther away from her miserable home and the cruel mistress who had killed her kitten.

"At last, in the evening, she came to a farmhouse. She was very, very weary and almost blind with fatigue. She wandered into the kitchen of the farmhouse and sat down upon a chair and asked for a glass of milk. There was a big, bearded farmer sitting there, and he got up and took a jug from the shelf and gave her some milk to drink and a piece of bread to eat. When she had finished he lifted her up in his arms and kissed her and carried her to the stable and laid her down on some hay in a manger above the oxen. Oh, it was sweet to be carried in those strong arms and to be kissed by those kindly lips!

"But the next day the little girl was awakened by the sounds of the oxen stirring and she was very frightened. So she climbed down from the manger

all by herself and ran in a panic out and away—on towards the snow-capped mountains, on towards the cold waters of the great lake. So she ran and stumbled on till the sun was clear above the horizon. Then she came upon a young Englishman who was sitting by the road. His knapsack was at his side and he was eating his breakfast. She was very hungry. She stopped and looked at him and his food. He offered her an egg. She took it and sat down to eat it. He gave her a glass of wine from his flask. She drank it. Oh, it was warm and good. He spoke very kindly to her, in a gentle voice, a voice as soft as the washing of the waves of the lake. She cried because of his kindness and presently told him all her story——”

She broke off suddenly and looked up at Muriel, whose eyes were glistening with tears, and then at Arthur, who sat at the table, his head buried in his arms.

“ You can guess the rest,” she said, abruptly. “ I loved him and I love him. He loved me, too, I know he did—but he always loved himself better. That is the way with men, is n’t it ? He was ambitious and he always told me that he could not marry me—oh, I do not pretend that he deceived me—but I always hoped some day he would marry me all the same. That is what we always do think, *nous autres femmes, n'est-ce pas ?*

" And then—yes—there came a little child into our lives. I did not want it. It is dead now. I wanted it to die then. It was a little boy, oh, so, so tiny. I wish now that he had lived. He would have been *that* high by this time if he had not died, and if he had lived I should have had something to live for now and to love and some one to protect me, then. And a woman like me needs some one to protect her, does n't she ? I should have had some one to work for too, and to save for, then. And a woman like me needs that, does n't she ? Otherwise, she tries to forget—she has no other object in life—she just tries to forget. Now I have nothing. I have only myself. And what is myself ? And if he had lived, I think that Arthur would never have made up his mind to leave me. But I thought that he would come between his father and me. And I wanted all his father's love. I was so greedy of that. Women like us, you know, have to learn how best to please men—that is for men our charm. That is why they love us, because they are so selfish. And men, especially if they are respectable fathers of families or young bachelors who intend to marry—do not like children. *We* love our children, if we have any, and respect them, though nobody respects us. But we cannot have them to live with us for that reason. We must hide them and love them in secret. They must never come into our dressing-rooms.

We love them and embrace them by stealth; then we wipe the tears from our eyes and go, with a smile, to drive gayly in the Bois with our lovers.

"So I wanted our little boy to die. I prayed that he might die and in answer to my prayer death came and took him, oh, so gently; like a nurse who takes a child, that is sleeping uneasily, out of its cradle into her own warm bed, and then a peaceful sleep comes upon the child. I had prayed to God to take him and he granted my prayer. I must not complain. Do you believe in God? I do. I must. For whenever I have wanted anything very much or whenever I have been in real difficulties I have prayed to him and he has granted my request. But I wish that he had denied me that prayer and that our little Arthur had lived——"

"Arthur!" exclaimed Muriel, protesting.

"Yes, Arthur. That was his name. Of course it was. You do not grudge me my little Arthur? Be jealous of me—but do not be jealous of that little life!"

Muriel came forward and took Li-Li's hands in her own.

"I am sorry," she said in a broken voice, "I was wrong. I was selfish. I was unjust. You do love him and I respect your love. Yes, let us pity and respect each other. We are two women most un-

happy in our love. But I most of all. For he is yours and I have no right, no wish, believe me, to take him from you. He is yours and he must marry you."

All the well-springs of gratitude and generosity in Li-Li's heart broke forth at those words of sisterly tenderness, and in a spirit of rare self-sacrifice, now that it was offered to her, she refused the prize for which she had been fighting. The sudden vision of happiness in store for her suggested by Muriel's words made plain what the storms of passion and impulse had hidden—the utter impossibility of its consummation. She looked at Arthur and heard him groan as he realized that Muriel had forever renounced him.

" You give him up to me ? " she cried at first, joyfully. " Arthur will marry me ? Ah, but no. What did he say ? ' We must listen to reason and face the facts,' he said. But, oh, this is a happy dream—a happy, happy dream, and I do not like to wake from it. Suppose he did marry me. Let me dream what would happen. We would be so happy for a while—and then ? He is an ambitious man. How should I further his ambitions ? I should ruin them. Would he like me the better for that ? No, he would hate me. He is a poor man. I should keep him poor. Would he like me the better for that ? He would learn to curse me. Oh, no ! The

dream is not so pleasant after all. Let us wake from it and face the facts, as he said. The facts are very hard for me. They show me that I must go out of his life and out of yours. You must forget me and forgive him. I will leave him to you, just because I love him—and not a little because I love you. And you must forgive him everything, or what is your love worth? Yes. That is best. I see it. I know it. That is best. I wish I could think it were not."

"And you, what of you?" said Muriel, still holding the hands of her fallen sister.

Li-Li drew her hands hastily from Muriel's and laughed hysterically.

"Me? Don't bother about me. I shall have a good time. Women like me always do have, don't we? A good time till we are thirty, and then marriage or suicide after—that's our ideal, is n't it? A pretty face will always buy anybody that—and of course we have no feelings. Feelings? We are women of like passions with all the rest of those who are so cold and cruel, so merciless and meek. We were once as pure and innocent and womanly as you, till love proved too strong for us and man once more turned traitor. Oh, I shall have a good time. And if sometimes in the midst of my good time the thought *will* make itself felt—the thought of what I once was, of what I might have been,

of what I once hoped to be—oh, well, it will be all right. There is always champagne."

Muriel placed her hand on Li-Li's shoulder and looked into her distraught eyes.

"No," she said quickly, firmly, "you will not live that life. There is too much good in you for that. You are a better, nobler woman than I am. You will not trample on your nobility like that and spoil the beauty of your generosity. I cannot marry Mr. Merivale, in spite of all you have said, but neither can you. Neither must you have anything more to do with him. Between us we will save him from himself. Promise me! I promise you to do all I can, too. But you will not live that life. I know you will always be very unhappy. I think you are one of those people who have to pay for other people's sins. You will not live that life! Promise me! Promise me! I will help you if I may."

"No! I will not live that life, then! I promise you. Kiss me now, once. Oh, I could love you. But your help—no! Arthur knows that I can earn a livelihood—otherwise!"

She smiled at Arthur through her tears. The memory of her pantomime came upon him in a flood of bitterness and shame. The vision of the misery he had wrought was greater than he could bear. He staggered to his feet.

" I have wrecked our three lives," he said, " and what is there left for me to do now? And what else could I have done? Love is too strong for me. Love is too strong!"

" Love? " said Muriel bitterly.

" Yes, " he answered vehemently, " that at least you must not doubt. Never in my heart have I been unfaithful to you or to my love for you. Since you came into my life again, Li-Li has gone out of it. Whatever happens, all is over between us."

" It is true, " said Li-Li to herself, as she watched him. " Poor Li-Li! I ought to have understood before. Oh, God! I think my heart is broken."

" My life before I met you this summer, " he continued, speaking to Muriel with the force of truth and despair, " what is it to you? It has nothing to do with you. You have no right to demand an account of it. It is mine and Li-Li's. I do not owe you the reckoning."

" You mean that? " asked Muriel.

" Yes, I mean it. Nothing more—nothing less. We men are not angels. We have only one life to live in this world and we must live it as best we can. There is much sorrow in it and much toil for most of us. Who shall blame us if we take such pleasure as we can find in it? I lived my life as best I could—it was, I know, a poor best. After a

long struggle I had crushed your memory from my mind. I had no more hope of you. It was no disloyalty to you when fate threw Li-Li in my path and I accepted the gift. I did not know you loved me. I had no prospect of ever seeing you again. I owe you no account of the matter. But I met you again and loved you—loved you against my will, my desire, my reason. Love was too strong for me. Too strong for you. You gave me your heart; you promised me your hand. You have no reason, no right to withdraw that promise. I am the man, just the same man in mind and body and character that you learnt to love. I have not altered. I have not deceived you. I am the man that I have been, moulded by my past acts, formed by my bygone follies, struggles, failures, and successes. I am the man you learned to love. Love me still. With you to aid, to strengthen, to guide, to inspire me I shall become a better man,—much better. With you I shall start fresh and strong in the race before me. Muriel, forgive me and forget—and promise that you will——”

“ I do not know. I do not know what to do,” said Muriel as she turned in her cruel distress to—but Li-Li was gone. She had slipped away whilst Arthur was pleading with the woman to whom she had yielded up the whole treasure of her heart, unnoticed, unsped.

"What has become of Li-Li?" Muriel cried.
"What will become of her?"

"Li-Li?" echoed Arthur and started as he spoke and threw himself into the attitude of one who listens intently. For he seemed to hear from the street below the sound of a girl singing to a mandolin the words of a French chansonette. And he seemed to hear in the intervals of the song a mocking voice cry out:

"Merci, Madame! Merci, Monsieur!"

He rushed to the window, threw up the sash, and leaned out, gazing into the street. And again the words were wafted to his ear in waves of mocking laughter: "Merci, Madame! Merci, Monsieur!"

"Come back!" called Muriel, "come back! Oh, it is not fair. It is not fair!"

"She will not come back," answered Merivale, still leaning out of the window, searching in vain for the sight of Li-Li.

Muriel sank sobbing on the sofa:

"What shall I do? What shall I do? And, Arthur, I loved you so!"





CHAPTER XII

THE CONDOLENCE OF AUNT DORCAS

MURIEL had returned to Prancehurst suddenly. One more of those tragic little paragraphs had appeared in the papers stating that the marriage arranged between Mr. Arthur Merivale, M.P., and Miss Muriel Bowness, the well-known novelist, would not take place. No reason was given to the world, but the world had no difficulty in discovering the cause. The gossip which had connected Merivale's name with the Parisian danseuse had been previously more or less veiled. Now it was veiled no longer. Everybody, it was discovered, had known all the time and everybody had always been convinced that the marriage would never take place—ought never to take place; but it was not their business and they had not liked to make trouble by saying so. Besides, one can never be quite sure. Well, it was lucky that the girl had found out in time, and quite right of her to break off the match. Whatever they do on the stage or

in novels, in real life this sort of thing is intolerable. Mr. Merivale must be made to feel it, too. " Of course, my dear, you 've heard how she did find out ? Quite dramatic the story is"—and so forth.

Merivale himself refused to speak on the matter even to his most intimate friends. He gave no reason for the breaking off of his engagement and made no reference to it. He simply buried himself in blue-books and committee work in the House; refused all invitations on the plea of work, and, even to Radlet, would speak of nothing but politics.

Muriel had returned to Prancehurst and told Ted and Aunt Dorcas that the marriage was impossible. She, too, had refused to give any reason or to discuss the matter. " It is impossible," was all she would say. " There is nothing to be done. Nothing can possibly make any difference now. Please help me to forget. That is all I ask of you."

She suffered horribly in her loneliness. The misery of her loss, the shock of her discovery seemed to increase rather than to diminish as the days went by. She was bitterly ashamed of herself for having given her love to such a man. But what added to her mortification was that she soon had to acknowledge that she loved him still in spite of all and yearned for him. Cruelly bruised and crushed, love lay bleeding, but still alive, in her heart. She had known that things of this sort happen in the

world, but it had never occurred to her that they could by any means come within the range of her own personal experience. Her modesty had been rudely outraged by the scene in Arthur's rooms. Her self-respect was most wantonly wounded by the ever-recurring thought that she had loved and kissed a man who had led a life like his. She suffered thus intensely for his sins. But to her feeling for him how wonderfully little difference it all made! She had to confess to herself, mortifying to her pride as the confession was, that she loved him as much as ever. Her quick sympathy and intuitive knowledge of human nature, which had made her so successful as a novelist, had enabled her, also, to read between the lines of Liane's story, and, without in the least endeavoring to find excuses for Arthur, she understood how he had slipped into that liaison, for never was a man less master of his fate or a more incompetent captain of his soul. So thoroughly did she comprehend Arthur's character, so obvious to her were his cravings for sympathetic companionship and his utter inability to fight against fortune, that she readily admitted that he was bound to act as he had acted in Liane's case. She could even pity him. The lonely man, starved of love, the lonely, lovely girl, fleeing from persecution and finding protection in him; the intense gratitude each would feel toward the other for

supplying what each most needed ; the overwhelming temptation of opportunity—these were factors of the situation which made it easy to excuse it. It was not his conduct towards Liane, but his conduct towards herself that she found inexcusable ; for he had taken her love under false pretences. An intense sympathy for Liane bore witness to the beautiful unselfishness of her nature. Marriage, she recognized, was impossible in their case, as impossible as it was in her own. But she found relief in planning and praying for the happiness of that woman. Alas ! she could not write to her, for Liane had completely disappeared.

It was impossible for her to marry Mr. Merivale. So she had told Aunt Dorcas and Ted, and though she felt she owed them an explanation it was intolerable for her to explain. Aunt Dorcas was, of course, bitterly aggrieved.

"It is perfectly absurd, child," she said one afternoon, as they sat in the garden after luncheon, and it was not the first time she had said so. "This foolish freak of yours spoils all our arrangements. I don't know how you can be so selfish. You really cannot be allowed to break off the match like this at the eleventh hour for nothing."

"It is not for nothing, Aunt Dorcas," Muriel answered quietly. "I know what I am doing and why."

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"Then that is more than I do," snapped her aunt, "and more than it seems you think me worth telling. Imagine refusing to marry a man just on account of some trumpery little lovers' quarrel! It is ridiculous. I have never heard of such a thing, never. Girls did not behave like that in my day, I can assure you. And your trousseau half ready, too. It makes me quite ill. I never was so upset in my life, never. You have made me quite, quite ill with your nonsense and foolish behavior. What did your poor father do to have such a daughter?"

"Indeed I don't know; but I assure you I am very sorry to cause you inconvenience, Aunt Dorcas," said Muriel wearily. "I know this sudden change of plans must have upset you very much. It was bound to do so, but I could not help it. I wish you would see the doctor if you feel ill. Won't you let me send for him?"

Muriel was trying to please and pacify her by taking her illness seriously. But Aunt Dorcas was, by nature, unwilling to be pleased. Rather than be pacified she chose to be the more offended.

"Doctor!" she exclaimed indignantly, "certainly not. I am much too ill to see the doctor. The best way to cure me is to get over this foolish tiff and——"

Exasperation deprived her of her words. A sudden interruption in the order of things is one of the

greatest calamities an old maid can suffer. Combined in Aunt Dorcas's case was a genuine regret that Muriel was throwing away, as she conceived, her chance of a happy marriage. It was intolerable. Muriel too was roused.

"I tell you it is not a foolish tiff," she replied with some heat. "I tell you I love him—that is the shame of it—as much as I ever did. But I know now that it is not possible for me to marry him—*not possible*. Is not that enough? I cannot tell you more. But I love him still. Should I say that if we had only had a foolish tiff? I love him—that is the horrible, shameful part of it. But I cannot marry him. I ought not and I will not. Don't you see that I must have a very good reason for saying that and can't you understand that it is not a mere bagatelle to me whether I do or not—that it is all a very—very poor joke for me?"

Her fortitude gave way. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

It was the first time in her life that Aunt Dorcas had ever seen her niece break down. Never before had Muriel given way to tears in her presence. Aunt Dorcas suddenly realized that it was no small matter, then, which had caused such affliction. There must be a wound in her heart of a kind altogether different from the little stabs and cuts with which she had been accustomed to train her. The

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acid old spinster grew suddenly sweet as she recognized this fact. All her selfishness left her and a deep sympathy filled her soul at the sight of this great suffering. She looked for a minute at the girl who sat sobbing by her side, and tears came silently into her own eyes as she perceived that to one so young and beautiful had come the barren misery of her own experience.

" Dear child," she said, stretching out her withered hand and drawing Muriel's soft young hand into her lap, and speaking very gently to her, " I am sorry. I am a very cross and bitter old woman. You must often find me so. But I want to say something now to comfort you. I hardly know what to say or how to say it. But I am sure that even in our worst sorrows there is something to be thankful for. Oh, I know that I have set you a bad example there. But I feel sure that I ought always to be thankful, though I never am. Perhaps it is easier to see the bright side of other people's misery. You have been so good, so kind, so forbearing with me, dear. What can I do to help you now ? "

Muriel looked up in gratitude. The tears were swimming in her eyes. She bit her lip to repress the sobs that sprang up afresh in response to the strange tenderness of her old aunt, and slowly shook her head.

" Shall I tell you why I envy you now, even in the midst of your cruel disappointment ? I envy you because you have known what it is to be loved."

In response to these words of gentle sympathy Muriel poured out the pent-up bitterness of her soul, conscious the while of a feeling of poignant gratitude towards her unexpected comforter.

" But that is just what makes it so unbearable. All my life long I have hungered for love and now that I have tasted it I cannot do without it. At one time I thought that success as a writer, if I could obtain it, would make me perfectly happy and content at last, and then, when success came, it quickly palled, because there was no one with whom to share it. All the glory and triumph and riches of this world are Dead Sea apples in the mouth of one who is condemned to suffer that most cruel, silent solitude of the soul, which yearns for sympathy it cannot ask and longs for expression it cannot find. I was alone, but I tried for years to find solace in my imagination and built for my soul a lordly treasure house in which the prince of my fancy comforted and inspired me. But Arthur was my prince,—and now that he has failed me he has taken even that resource from me. I know now that he can never have loved me wholly and truly, and if he is false I cannot love him at last and I ought not to love him. And life without love—oh,

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Aunt Dorcas, you are right, it is an unbearable misery, a hateful imposition, an intolerable burden. I cannot bear it."

" You will never have to, dearest; never, that is, as I have. For you have his love. You *are* loved still. Oh, I know it. I can see it. He loves you as deeply and as truly as a man can. Well, we will not talk of him, then. But he loves you. And, don't you understand, my darling, how precious a possession that is, and will be all your life long? Oh, you will understand, some day, and be grateful. I know—because, dearest, I have never been loved—in that way—by a man. I suppose I must blame myself. I was always too peevish, too jealous, too exacting. I was never lovable and so, I suppose, I was never loved. And yet I was bright enough and gay enough once—when I was a girl."

Aunt Dorcas stopped and caressed the hand that lay, responsive, between her two palms. Then she continued in a low, broken voice:

" I thought that I was loved once and I gave my love to a man who did not want it. Oh, I do not blame him. It was my fault, not his. Yes—but still he should have seen. He was wrapt in the clouds all his short life—and I—I, all my long, bitter days have been wedded to his memory. It was long, long ago, in the days when the recollection of

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Newman's perversion to the Romish Church still had power to unsettle many minds. And he, dear, was a clergyman in the Church of England. Often and often would he come and discuss with me questions of belief—questions of theology and doctrines that were indeed not infrequently beyond me. But I was eager to discuss them, for his sake, chiefly, but also for my own. Then came the day when he followed the example of Newman and the others and he too 'verted. It was a great blow to me and seemed at first as if it must break our friendship. But it did not. He would not allow it to be so, and his very insistence, his charming, half melancholy insistence, helped still further to mislead me. I began to love him more dearly both for his courage and his constancy. He used to call me a little heretic, as indeed I was from his new point of view, and he used to try to convert me, although he never pushed his proselytizing too vigorously, too seriously. He had a most wonderful manner, my dear, of taking one's hand gently between his two and pressing it, when he wished to bring all his powers of persuasion to bear and to help one to surmount some great stumbling-block of belief. And I—well, dear, you understand ? ”

“ Yes, oh, yes! I understand,” murmured Muriel in sympathy, forgetting for the moment her own trouble in the wonder of Aunt Dorcas's confidence.

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" Then came the day when he suddenly announced that he would shortly become a priest in that—in that communion. And you see, dear, what that meant to me ? A priest may not marry. He had never cared for me, never thought of me for an instant in the way I had supposed. Oh, the bitterness, the humiliation of it. For I had learned to love him. And so, dear, never all my life long have I listened to a word of love, never, never!"

" He died," continued Aunt Dorcas, after a moment's silence, " died not long afterwards. He was always delicate; a spiritual man if ever there was one, and his love was not of this world. But I have always hungered for the love that is called human, and never, never, *never* found it. Do you wonder that I am a cross and bitter old woman ? Do you see now why even in your misery I can still find it in my heart to envy you ? Dear child, I think and hope you two will come together again and be happy. But if not, at least you will have the great happiness of the memory of having once been loved. And I never, never!"

There was a pause whilst both women sobbed gently, pitying one another out of the fulness of their own experience, and the pressure of their hands told the tale which their hearts were too full to speak.

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"And so, dear Muriel," Aunt Dorcas concluded—and her conclusion was the legitimate deduction from her premises, although she was far from being conscious of any logical exercise,—“and so, if love is indeed as precious a possession as I fancy, it seems to me that you ought to be ready to make almost any sacrifice of pride to keep it. Or if it is a matter of forgiveness, forgive, and if it is a matter of forgetting, forget. Do not throw away the pearls of life, my dear, and don't condemn yourself to the bitterness of a spinster's life, a life of ever-present disappointment and unceasing regret, for the sake of a small scruple or a little self-denial or worthy humiliation. Don't tell me anything about it now, dear, unless you like, but just promise me to think calmly over it and see whether there is n't, anywhere, any way out of it. And if there is, be bold to take it. It is the right thing to do, I assure you. It is worth it. For the dear, good fellow loves you—that I know—and whether this business is his fault or not, he ought to be forgiven much for that. And you love him, you say—and it is easy to forgive much to those who love us and whom we love. So be wise and try to be generous. Take my advice and follow the dictates of your heart. I am an old woman. I have seen a good deal of this world, my dear. The more I see of it the less I consider it. Don't care in the least what any-

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body says, but do as your heart bids you. There, there, I declare, I am becoming quite a Radical."

And indeed, like every woman when her heart is touched, Aunt Dorcas was a true Liberal in love.

It was a curious line of comforting that Aunt Dorcas had chosen; very modern it would have sounded to those who know nothing of the past, but it was, at least for the time being, effective. The horrible hunger and thirst after love, the cruel barrenness of the heart whose love had never found a mortal close, revealed by Aunt Dorcas's story, roused Muriel from her grief. Her warm sympathetic nature went out in pity to the lonely, bitter woman who had guarded her secret from her so long and only discovered it now in an access of fellow-feeling. The unselfish desire to comfort her to which the revelation bore witness stirred in her the desire to feel comforted. She strove to hide the agony of her wound from one who had so nobly endeavored to soothe it. And the very effort helped to assuage her pain.

But still the question was ever before her—what should she do? Should she forgive and forget and marry Arthur in spite of all, as Liane had said, as Aunt Dorcas urged? How *could* she? The question was ever before her whilst the weeks drifted by and found it still unanswered, save by that other

question wrung from the anguish of her spirit—how could she ?

What he should do was also a question which Ted Bowness had to consider. Muriel would give no explanation of the sudden rupture of her engagement. All she would say on the matter was to beg him to be silent and help her to forget. Ted fingered his riding-whip nervously and thought savagely of Merivale. It was Merivale's fault, he was sure, and if it was, the exercise of the good old English custom of horse-whipping appealed to him as the right and pleasant method to be practised. If Merivale had behaved badly to his sister he should most certainly suffer for it.

Ted Bowness, therefore, waited some weeks expecting and hoping to hear, whether from Muriel or Arthur, some explanation of events. As he did not hear, he at length wrote a line to Merivale asking for a private explanation. An explanation with Ted was the last thing Arthur desired. His conscience was always ready with excuses for his own conduct and the subtlety of his mind had enabled him to avoid hitherto a complete acknowledgment of the vileness of his own behavior. He shrank, with the cowardice natural to a most accomplished self-deceiver, from the downright verdict of a man like Ted. Ted, he knew in his heart, would brush away all the flimsy distinctions and comforting ex-

cuses with which he was shielding himself from too severe self-condemnation. Ted would go straight to the point and with the undeceivable instinct of a man who is by nature and above all things a fair and square, clean-hearted gentleman, he would put things in so bald and coarse a way that a quarrel might arise. A quarrel of that kind Merivale especially desired to avoid. He therefore answered Ted with a long and verbose epistle in which he explained nothing and suggested that no explanation would do any good. Next day Ted Bowness ran up to town and came to see Merivale in his rooms in the morning before the latter had gone down to the House.

Stirring events were happening in the world in those days. The magnitude of the war in South Africa was just beginning to be realized by the people at home. The determination and completeness of the Boer conspiracy to drive the British into the sea was being revealed by the perfection of the enemy's preparations and the success of his arms. The country was stirred to the depths by the news of disaster upon disaster, by the outburst of jubilant hatred upon the Continent, the depressing fear that Ladysmith or Kimberley might fall, and the galling insult of the unresisted invasion of British colonies. One by one Merivale's prophecies were coming true. Step by step his foresight was being

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confirmed. His opportunity had come, and he knew how to make the best of it. Daily his reputation was increasing. Energetic work in the House, able writing in the Press, vigorous speaking in public were making his name familiar as that of a man who had foresight and practical wisdom in affairs, qualities in which others, more idealistic or more optimistic or more sleepy, had so lamentably failed.

Darker and more depressing the outlook grew daily. Men recognized that it was no time for recrimination or despair. It was a time for energetic effort and individual action. Leadership only was wanted. But the Government was called upon in vain to lead. The voice of the private member became, therefore, of more importance than usual. In a cause which he thoroughly understood and espoused with all his heart and mind, Merivale had found his opportunity and was using it. He was voting with his party while he contrived to make his independence both felt and feared. And modern ministries are only to be ruled by fear. On the day on which Ted Bowness burst suddenly into his rooms he was preparing the lines of an important speech which he hoped to deliver when called upon to move the crucial amendment which stood in his name.

Ted Bowness walked in and said, "Good-morning." But unobtrusively he did not shake hands with his friend.

"I got your letter," he explained bluntly,—he was not the sort of man to beat about the bush when there was any matter which he wanted cleared,—“and I have come to the conclusion that I am entitled to an explanation, in spite of the fact that both Muriel and you do not wish to give me one. I need not tell you that this sudden breaking off of her engagement without any reason being given us—well, it is not fair to her or to me. Her reputation will suffer; so will yours. The reason must be serious—that I know from my knowledge of both her and you. It must be so serious that it will affect our relations too. Therefore, out of consideration to all parties concerned, I think you had better tell me all about it."

Merivale was silent for a while. Then he got up, and pacing the room, he began to speak.

"I think you are right. Here are the facts."

He told the story of his liaison with Liane. He made what excuse he could for its occurrence, and he laid great stress on the fact that he had completely broken it off before his return to England. He impressed upon Ted that he had given way to his love for Muriel only after long and repeated struggles. He had said nothing to her of the other matter because it was, for him, so utterly past and so completely impossible, as he thought, to come again into his life. His love for Muriel had made a

new man of him and he had persuaded himself that he owed her his future, which, now, whether she forgave him or not, *must* be hers. But his past was his own and done with. For the rest, he was sorry—but he still felt that he could and would make his life worthy of her, if she would forgive——

“ As man to man, as friend to friend, do you blame me ? ” he wound up. He had spoken fluently the excuses he was wont to frame for himself. They had always sounded straightforward and satisfactory to him. Fortune which had brought, first Liane, then Muriel, so irresistibly into his life was more to blame than he. He had needed their love, he had needed that their lives should be part of his, so overwhelmingly. But somehow, as he spoke now, his case seemed less honorable and the plausibility faded from his defence. There was a stolid air of contemptuous disapproval in Ted’s face, a moral condemnation which sprang from the man’s instinct of honor and was not to be overcome by subtle debate, which chilled the warmth of his own satisfaction.

Ted’s answer none the less came as a shock to him. He got up quickly and put on his gloves. Whilst he did so he spoke slowly, in tones of the most galling contempt and disgust.

“ You don’t seem to realize,” he said, “ what a blackguard you are. Till you do, I think you de-

serve all you 'll get and more. I don't know how you expect a decent girl to marry you after you have behaved as you have done to her, and, worse, to that other girl. You 've asked for my opinion and you shall have it. My opinion of you is that you are a waster—a contemptible cotter. If you 're not intentionally a blackguard you are a weak-kneed beast."

Merivale was silent. He sat with his head between his hands and did not stir. Ted Bowness left the room slowly, waiting, perhaps hoping, for an outbreak. But none came. Merivale was acknowledging at last even to himself the facts of the case. Ted Bowness was not given to mincing terms or in the long run to misjudging men. We have seen what his verdict was. "There is a taint, a flaw somewhere in Merivale," that had been the verdict of Monckton long before. We must make allowances for the fact that Monckton was more cynical and had a lower standard of men, and his estimate, therefore, sounded more charitable. And to Merivale himself at last it was clear, thanks to Ted's downright condemnation of him, that the proper verdict on his conduct could not honestly be more complimentary. As he sat there with his head on his hands he saw himself for the first time as he really was. The veil of exculpatory explanations was torn from him and he shivered in his nakedness.

Ted was quite right. By his long silence he had confessed the fact. He *was* a weak-kneed creature—a waster, as Ted had put it. Looking back he saw now and admitted to himself, in one of those moments of blinding self-knowledge which come to a man in such crises, that he had spent his life, so far, terribly amiss. Crying always for the opportunity to do something, when the opportunity had been given him, not once or twice only, he had lost it or refused it. A vain, unprofitable desire for personal notoriety and prestige, he had always translated into terms of legitimate, balked ambition. He had fretted and complained that he was debarred from acting, when, all the time, he was not at heart a genuine man of action, but a man of words. It was to be, or to be thought somebody, not to *do* something that he had desired. To hear his own voice and to see its influence acknowledged; to perceive his own cleverness in print and to be praised for it—that was for him the great glory. Over and over again he had claimed and clamored and determined to do something. Yet, in Cumberland, instead of cultivating his garden as Muriel in Kent had cultivated hers, he had sulked and turned gradually morose, cynical, and idle. But he had not been strong enough to be thoroughgoing even in his cynicism. His heart had led him to perform the one really noble, though for him fatal, action of

his life by giving up to the care of his mother those years of a man's life which are meant for himself; his heart, combined with a slightly morbid craving for sympathy, had led him into an act of still more fatal folly which was wicked as well. Never, except under the influence of a woman of more character than himself, had he found the will-power to use to any good purpose the gifts of eloquence and intellect with which he had been dowered.

He had flattered himself that he might make his mark as a man of action, given opportunity. He was beginning to see the truth now. Only under the influence of others had he shown the ability to act. He was only, after all, a weaver of words, an artist in those phrases that described and appealed to the feelings of practical men.

In this estimate he was not quite fair to himself. For he had proved by his speeches, his writing, and his work that he was himself a practical man—a man of energy and right decision in the affairs of others—a man made for politics, the higher politics of government. But he lacked the power to regulate and control his own life. Only of other people's business was he a capable director. Gifted with a real genius for moulding the policy of a nation he had none for the private conduct of his own life. In his own career he had shown himself again and again deplorably weak. He was a pilot who

could not steer his own ship, a guide who could not save himself from stumbling. In public a strong director of affairs, in private he was a reed to be blown hither and thither by the varying breezes of fortune. He seemed a paradox in gifts, but closer analysis would show that whilst in the one case his intellect was proved to be clear and brilliant, in the other the moral power of his mind was deficient. There are many preachers who save souls and yet lose their own; many physicians who can heal others, but themselves they cannot heal.

That was the explanation of him. He did not yet recognize the fact, but he did now see, under the influence of Ted's chastisement, all that was least admirable in his life and character. He beheld himself, at last, as he was at the worst and weakest, and a great loathing for his own weakness got hold of him. He felt an intense disgust both for himself and for all his ambitions. He hated and despised all his gifts and successes; his very eloquence he determined to forswear. He would stand by himself, he determined under the influence of this new sensation, in some new life of action; would do and dare this time indeed, and, without having to fall back on the inspiration of any woman, he would be sufficient unto himself and a leader among men. Bah! What *could* he do?

He dropped his hand from his head and it fell

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heavily on the newspaper that lay upon the table. He looked up with a sudden flash in his eyes. Here, to his hand, was the answer he sought. He rose from the chair in which Ted had left him sitting and made the rapid, nervous promenade of his room which was characteristic of him in moments of excitement. He stopped at last and laid his forefinger on the paper.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, "thank God! That's right! That's the way out of the difficulty. That is my chance. If I do that, all may come right in the end. That's the only way—the only way!"

He went to the bell and rang for Chingford.

"I am going down to the House now," he said, "and shall not be back till very late—or early—I expect. Call me in good time for the 9.15 train from Victoria to-morrow morning. I have to run down to Kent to make a speech to the Primrose League in the afternoon at Sir James Parsington's place."

"Sha'n't you stay the night, sir?" inquired Chingford. "Shall I pack your things?"

"No," answered Merivale, "I shall be back in the evening."

He went straight to the House of Commons after that and the brilliant speech he had delivered in the afternoon was the one absorbing topic in the lobby and in the political clubs that night.

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Tired but determined, he tumbled into his bed at two o'clock next morning and a few hours later was being shaken slowly south to lunch with the former member of his constituency. Luncheon that day was a weighty affair. It was served in the huge hall of Sir James's old country house to all his tenants and friends and to all the busybodies of either sex from far and near who were ready to cluster under the banner of the Primrose League at the sound of a promising dinner-gong and for the prospect of enjoying the eloquence of a Merivale. For an hour and a half the absorbing business of the day was transacted. At last, in the presence of a replete and contented company, Sir James, pompous, popular, aristocratic, and inarticulate, arose, and in three words—as he declared—left what was to be said to the new member of the division.

Merivale got up. The cheers that greeted him were sufficient evidence that his recent efforts in the House had won the approval of his constituency. Constituents dearly love to see their new member's name figuring in the London papers. They feel that their judgment is being justified and take credit to themselves for the acumen of their views.

Merivale began to speak in a happy vein of cheerful compliment. A local reference of personal flattery to his host put him on good terms with all his listeners. (Even those who disliked and despised

him most never denied his gifts in this direction, unless, indeed, they thought of calling it a trick.) Then he turned the attention of his audience to the great crisis of the country, of the empire. He did not disguise the magnitude of that crisis. For months, he said, an insolent but most brave and dangerous enemy had been invading British territory and the British forces had proved inadequate to repel him. The enemy was playing for a great stake which was a mere nothing in comparison to the vast interests which on our side were imperilled. If the Boers were ready and willing to risk everything that they held dear for the sake of an empire in South Africa, was it for us to be backward in making an effort on which our world-wide empire must depend? Surely no! The call to arms was sounding through the country. It was the time for men to ask themselves what their duty was, and having decided, to perform it.

“Here and here has England helped me—how can I help England, say!” That was the keynote of every true citizen to-day. From every side, from the country, from the cities, from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, from India, from Canada, from Australia, New Zealand, from Jamaica, from every colony which owned the rule of the Great White Queen, and from many another land which recognized the benefits—in spite of all our faults—of

British rule, that call to arms was being answered; from every class, whether rich or poor, gentle or peasant, destitute or titled, recruits were coming forward to fight for liberty, equality, and justice. He paused here amid a deep silence of men wondering to what point he was leading; of men thrilling already beneath his ardent oratory with the desire to fight for their brethren across the seas. Then he continued. It was a time, he said, when even a mere politician, a man of words and peace, might be excused for giving way to the martial ardor with which the breast of every man worthy of the name was tingling. It was a time, too, when perhaps the example of an otherwise useless man like himself might be of value in the eyes of those who judged the country through the conduct of its representatives. These considerations had led him to apply for a commission in the Yeomanry——

A deafening roar of cheers prevented him from completing his speech. The whole company rose to their feet and cheered him again and again. Under the volume of those ever-increasing plaudits he was overwhelmed. He sat down whilst the lusty farmers, glass in hand and one leg on the table, broke out into a resounding shout of song,—“For he’s a jolly good fellow!” The rafters rang again with the fine old compliment,—“For he’s a jolly good fellow!”

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And Merivale, intoxicated with the vehemence of his own eloquence and the splendid reception of his announcement, smiled happily.

“ For he ‘s a jolly good fellow! ”

Again the words sounded in his ears and this time the irony of them forced itself on his mind and the smile that flickered round his mouth was not so happy.

“ For he ‘s a jolly good fellow! ”

He grew excited once more by the cheering and the heartfelt enthusiasm which he had stirred in the hearts of these honest yokels and he smiled once more in self-appreciation.

“ For he ‘s a jolly good fellow! ” Yes! He half believed now that he was. He knew so well that he might have been. He determined that he would be. The smile of satisfaction faded from his lips and in its place succeeded the firm look of a man who registers a solemn vow or offers a silent, insistent prayer. Purged by the strong tonic of war, braced and purified by the severe medicine of a hard campaign with all its lessons of unselfishness and endurance, he vowed and prayed that he would return when all was over and done—return to claim the true, sweet girl who was by all the orderings of nature, his. He would return—if he returned at all—worthy at last even of her. He would deserve well of his country. He would deserve well of *her!* God help him!

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His eyes were dimmed with the emotion of his resolve. The intensity of his hope and determination half unmanned him. When he looked up again it was with lips trembling in a smile. But from the smile all trace of conceit and selfishness had faded at length and hope and humility had at long last taken possession of his life and of his soul.

“ For he 's a jolly good fellow,
And so say all of us.”

For the last time the ringing chorus resounded from the farmers' throats.





CHAPTER XIII

THE MUSINGS OF MONCKTON

(A letter from Reginald Monckton, Esq., to the
Hon. James Radlet, M.P., Q.C.)

BAD-SCHWARZWALD, Dec. —, 1899.

MOST FORTUNATE LONDONER,—

For the love of heaven write to me soon and tell me things. Here am I still suffering from my appalling exile at a German watering-place—*out* of the season. I underline “out” for though I have never been here in the season it must surely be less abominable then. Conceive me if you can, drinking water in the Black Forest and not even allowed the glorious native beer. Honestly I think the filth I am sluicing myself with is doing me good, but the boredom of the place is inconceivable. Within a month I shall be raving mad with it. I could eat yards of the insane root with greater impunity. Write to me soon, then, and give me news of the world whilst I can understand it still. Delay not, or your charity will have been exercised too late.

As I passed through Paris on my way here I heard that the charming Liane had retired to a convent. The event has caused much excitement and considerable epigram. The general opinion, I need hardly say, was that

her sojourn there would not last a lifetime. Three months, so they tell me, is the time the cure usually takes, or even less if the nunnery be very strict. This, however, is not my own opinion of what will occur in the present instance. I look here for an exception, and should be very little surprised to learn that her disease is chronic. But you see I have cures and baths on the brain—what brain I have left. If you have to break down at all, take my advice and don't break down in the winter and be condemned to take German baths. Lord! Lord! The seriousness of these people! If you could only see these Square-heads taking their baths, wallowing as once the pigs who discovered for the British King the waters of Bath must have wallowed; watching the clock, passing by the clock from one bath to another, drinking by the clock one disgusting lukewarm glass of water after another, thinking and talking of nothing but their health—*their* health, if you please! As if anybody cared a hang about *their* health. But one listens patiently for the sake of being able to tell them about one's own health, when they have finished. *I* do, I assure you—for I am one of them. “Morgen, Meinherr!” we say daily to one another, with the cheerful intonation of a cow with the dropsy. “Wie geht es?” And then we confide our symptoms to any one who will make the bare pretence of listening, whilst, mug in hand, we stand waiting in the cold, dark morning air—waiting for our allowance of sulphurous water in the Trinkhalle.

But this does n't interest you. Why should it? You have your idea of the Black Forest and are smiling at me. You fancy that I am really having a rather pleasant and slack time of it. There are such glorious walks in the Black Forest, are n't there? Yes, I know. A walk in the Black Forest is supposed to be a romantic

thing; a proceeding that fills you with charming sentiment. Perhaps it might be, under certain conditions. All I can say is that the reality just at present is quite unspeakable. Daily I squelch over sopping paths and blunder against dripping tree-trunks through miles of white mist till I come to one of those spots—you cannot avoid them—which they are pleased to call an *Aussichtspunkt*. That sounds encouraging, does n't it? I sit down to admire the view of dense rain and thick cloud, and, just as I have lighted a cigarette, one after another pale pot-bellies begin to arrive, perspiring gray-beards with their enormous Frauen. They mop their brows ; they have climbed the hill (I wish I could have added, "They come no more !"). They are proud and pleased, God bless them ! Their cuffs are dangling on their walking-sticks ; their round hats are hung by strings from the button-holes of their frock coats. But what care they ? Nothing perturbs them. They merely mop and pant, and "Schön !" they exclaim. "Wunderschön! Ach! Wunderbar !" "Wunderschön !" echoes Frau. "Wunderlieb !" returns her Man. "Ach ! Prachtvoll ! Herrlich—Schön !" The chorus rolls on in increasing volume till I bolt in disgust from one more *Aussichtspunkt*. My feelings, expressed and reduced to music, would hardly supply these good people with a *Salonstück*.

You notice that I am in a villainous temper and that I am working it off on paper. What else can I work it off on ? I am not fluent in the German tongue and the Band of the Kur-Committee drowns my English growls. But don't think I have nothing but sneers for the German race. Far from it. I know they are a great people. I recognize and admire their good qualities, their steady plug, their Deutsche Treue, and their Beer-power,

and all the rest of it. But I want to be in London and I am here, and this is not my sort of Paradise. If I were a diplomatist I could pretend to be happy. But I am not ; and I do *not* find my neighbors sympathetic.

There, on the balcony opposite my window, for instance, sits Hund, mit Gattin. He is registered in the hotel-book as a Sausage-Director (Fact!). There on that balcony he has sat all the morning, purring like a tom-cat, in the midst of flowers, flower-pots, and bouquets. He is celebrating his birthday, confound him! Why do I object to that ? you ask. Well, just because I was awakened this morning at six o'clock by three miserable rabbits blowing on trombones beneath my window, in their vile desire to serenade the birthday-keeping Herr Sausage-Director.

"G'r-rr. Water your damned flower-pots, do !" as Browning so happily phrased it. The brute is smoking a great, fat cigar. *I* have had to give up smoking cigars for the present. Do you wonder at my temper ?

The fact is, the Continent, these days, is not a fit place for an irascible Englishman like me. So forgive my querulousness and write to me. Tell me all the doings of the world we live in. Indulge, for pity's sake, my fondness for affairs and gratify my passion for the gossip of politics. Write to me, do, and tell me, also, about people. Tell me also what they are saying in the House about the War. We shall pull through, of course, and there will be no foreign intervention. But what is said in London ?

Above all, tell me about the marriage of our friend, Mr. Merivale. Is it or is it not to take place ? I am entitled to say "Yah !" (English) to you in the matter of that little scandal, I fancy. You must admit that my gossip was—"for once," you 'll say, as you always do—

well founded. Well, I 'm old woman enough to enjoy the right of saying, "I told you so." But what developments are in view ? The position, when I left town, was rapidly becoming intolerable for Merivale, I should imagine. His policy of masterly inactivity could not last. Unless something has occurred already, something will soon. Of that I am convinced. Tell me what that something is.

It is a great pity, and I don't myself see the way out of it for Merivale. I wonder if you could manage to give him the benefit of your advice. You are—bar rot—the wisest man I know, in the broadest sense of the term. I am sure Merivale would be grateful for some advice from you. Give it to him, if you can. But above all, write to *me*.

See what a huge budget I have written unto you! So long.

REGINALD MONCKTON.





CHAPTER XIV

THE MARRIAGE OF MR. MERIVALE

(A letter from the Hon. James Radlet, M.P.,
Q.C., to Reginald Monckton, Esq.)

LONDON, Jan. —, 1900.

MY DEAR MONCKTON,—

Many thanks for your letter. I 'm sorry to learn from it that you have not struck a very good patch. I should think taking the waters must always be a sorry pastime. And to have to give up beer and cigars, as well, is positively tragic ;—in Germany, too ! I feel more grateful than ever for my own rude health. *I* gave up giving up things twenty years ago. That is poor comfort for you, though—but all of us have to begin sooner or later and you 've not done yourself badly in the meantime !

We are having a very anxious time of it, here ; but the feeling of the country is splendid. As you say, we shall pull through. Then there will be, afterwards, a half-hearted attempt at Army Reform—a few trifling alterations made and nothing of any importance done. You are right about European interference, I believe. France is all right with a very good Government and the Exposition, but if the Nationalist party comes in, any excuse will be good enough for a war with England then.

You ask about Merivale. He has done a surprising thing. He certainly has the gift of being talked about. Applied for a commission in the Yeomanry and sailed for South Africa the other day ! So that obviates the need of my advice, which you are good enough to esteem so highly. I think he has really done the best thing and I am glad not to have had to advise him in any direction. I am getting chary, in my old age, of giving advice to anybody, especially if it is not asked for. If your advice is bad, it is bad, and if it is good, it is n't taken. I am coming to the conclusion that there are two sorts of people in the world who simply *won't* take good advice—who cannot be persuaded—for whom reason is without weight and eloquence dumb. And they are, firstly, women, and, secondly,—men !

I am dreadfully busy and have no time to do more than scribble you a note, which is a poor return for your long and amusing letter. But here is the spice of gossip that you ask for. May it sweeten your exile ! There is a rumor, unconfirmed but persistent, that the day before he sailed Miss Bowness was secretly married to Arthur Merivale. I cannot actually *deny* the story, and it was told me by several men in the clubs on the same day. I admit that as you are abroad and cannot have originated the *canard*, it has more chance of being true ! I can't very well ask Ted about it and nobody *knows* for certain. So all one can do is to fall back upon probabilities. I am not sure which way they point. Is she likely to have done this thing or not ? I hope she did. But in my heart of hearts I believe that the Marriage of Mr. Merivale has not taken place. What do you say ?

Yours ever,

J. R.

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"I say it has!" was Monckton's answer when he read the letter. "I say it has! And what is more, I 'll smoke a cigar and drink ein glas Bier in honor of it—nur eins!"

THE END



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